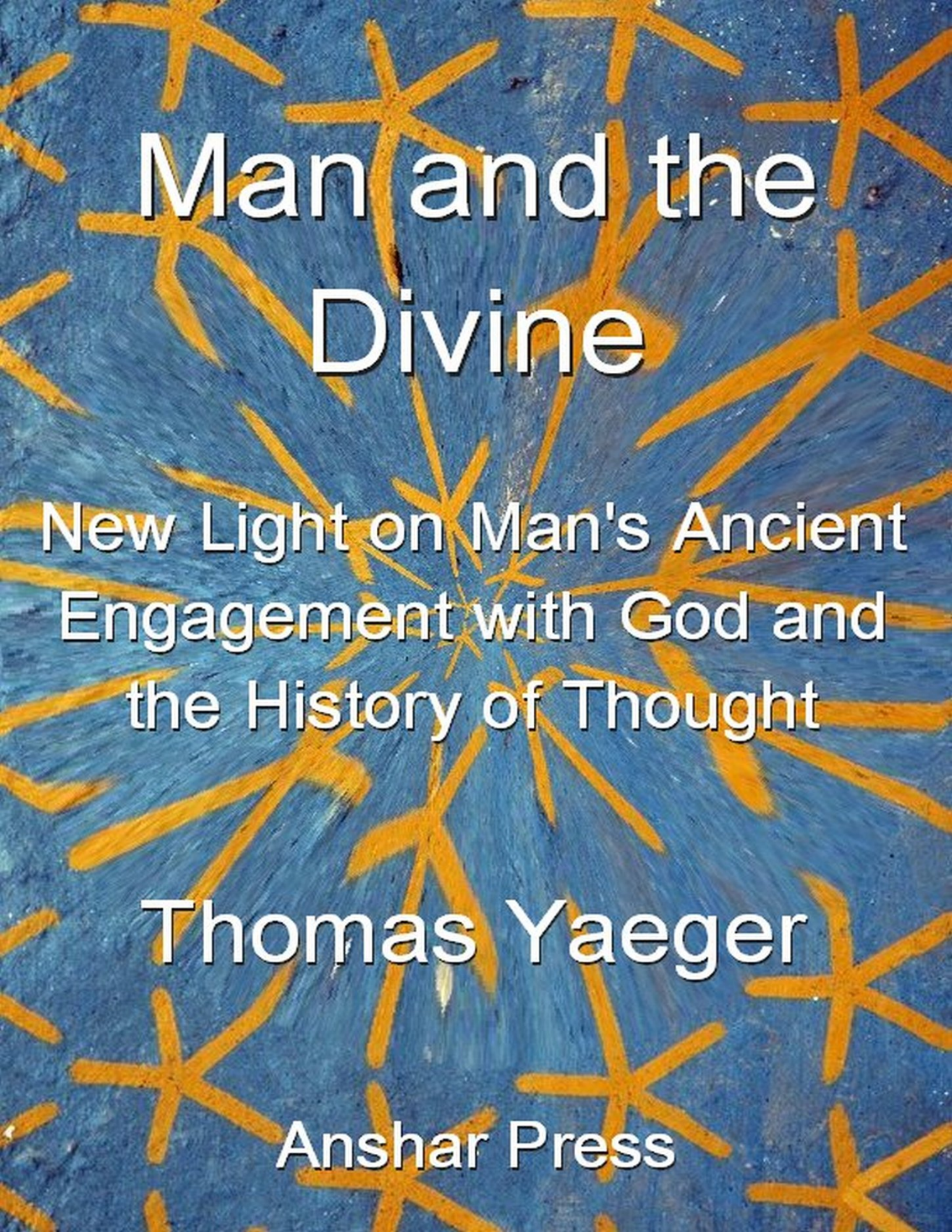
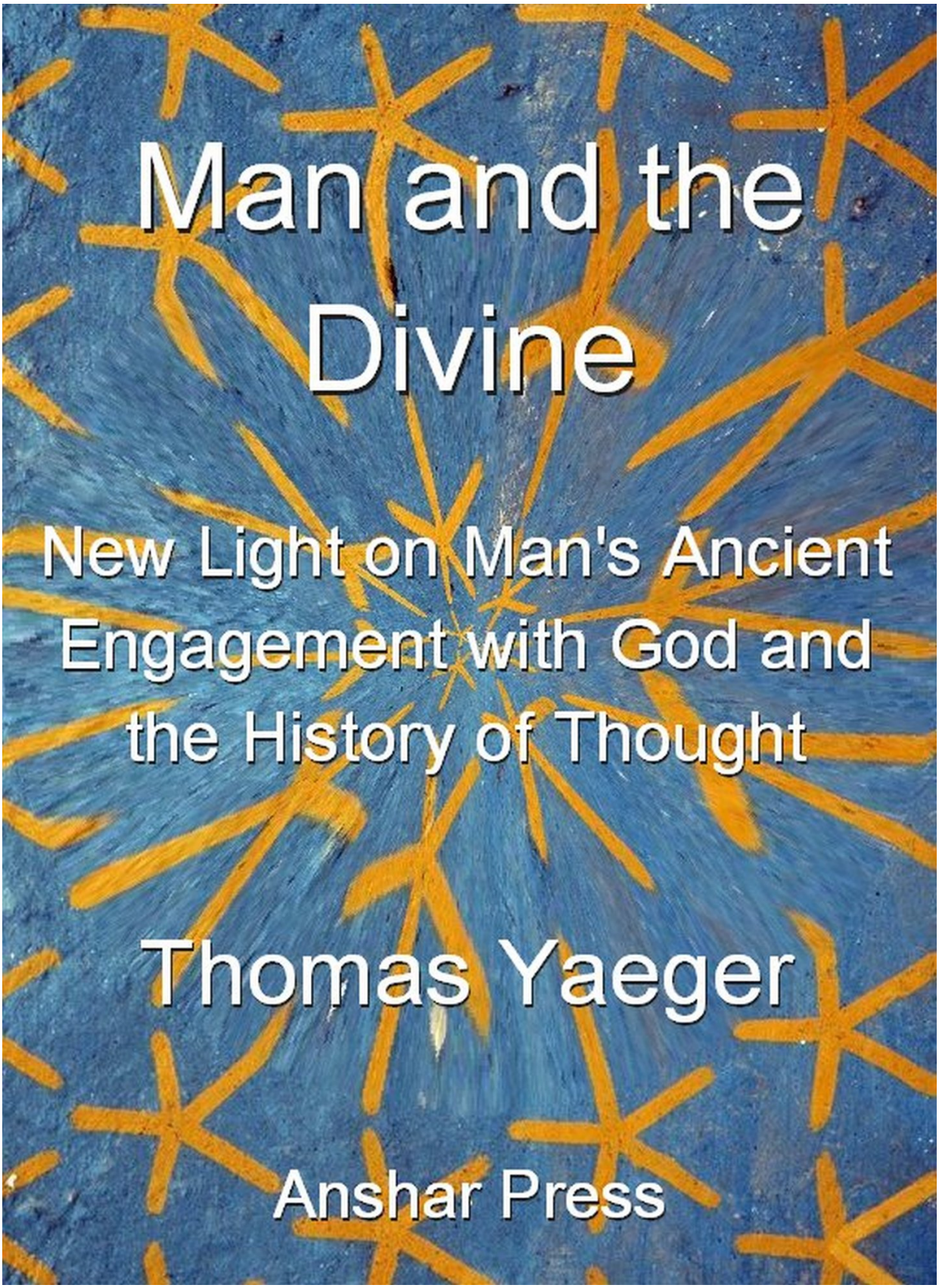

Man and the Divine
New Light on Man's Ancient Engagement with God and the History of Thought
Thomas Yaeger
Anshar Press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“The lord established a shrine, a holy shrine, whose interior is elaborately constructed. He established a shrine in the sea, a holy shrine, whose interior is elaborately constructed. The shrine, whose interior is a tangled thread, is beyond understanding…”

Enki and the world order, lines 285-298

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Preface

This is my second collection of essays on philosophy and ancient history. Like my first collection, *Understanding Ancient Thought*, it expands further on the arguments of *The Sacred History of Being*, which appeared in November 2015. Most of the chapters have appeared in draft form on my web site, and one first appeared on the web site of the Bibliographica Philosophica Hermetica, run by the Ritman Library in Amsterdam ('The Esoteric Conception of Divinity in the Ancient World'). Nearly all of them were originally written as stand-alone essays, so in a couple of cases the same evidence is discussed in more than one essay, but from a different point of view.

'Evading the Infinite' arose originally from a review of ten BBC broadcast episodes of Adrian W. Moore's 'A History of the Infinite', and a discussion with him about the content of the radio broadcasts and associated philosophical questions during late 2016 and up to the spring of 2018. I disagree with Moore's 'Aristotelian Finitism', since it is an approach which closes off any possibility of understanding the importance of the idea of infinity before Aristotle, but I am grateful to Moore for his willingness to engage with my questions, and sometimes at length.

Many of the other essays deal with the question of esoteric knowledge in antiquity, often from slightly different angles. 'The Death of Socrates' is one of those, a solicited response to one of a series of dramatized readings of famous speeches from history, staged by the Almeida Theatre in London in 2017. 'Distinguishing Belief and Faith' began as a meditation on some text by Alan Watts, but which expanded into a chapter about who believed what, and why, in ancient Mesopotamia. Descriptions of all of these essays can be found appended to this preface. 'Polytheism, Monotheism, and the Cult of the Aten', explores Akhenaten's religious innovations in the Egypt of the 14th century B.C.E. These are still difficult to understand, but we are getting closer.

Modern scholarship generally steers away from the idea that there may be an esoteric level to the nature of reality, but approaches questions surrounding esotericism in terms of a division between those who argue

that there is such an esoteric level of reality, and those who maintain that just because it is possible to think of such a thing and give it names and descriptions. does not mean that there is genuine esoteric knowledge to be had. The first group are sometimes described as 'Essentialists', and the second, as 'Nominalists'. I explored this pattern of thought in my book *J.G. Frazer and the Platonic Theory of Being,* where Frazer simply denied the idea that it was possible to say anything meaningful at all about a transcendent reality (Being), and consequently argued that Plato's work was built on a fundamental error, through the conversion of an epistemology into an ontology.

Some of the essays discuss something of the background to the writing of *The Sacred History of Being*. It was important to produce a concise and focussed argument, and many interesting discussions had to be put to one side in order to achieve that. *The Sacred History of Being* represents the core argument. What I have written elsewhere is best understood in terms of a sequence of extended footnotes to that book.

The final essay, 'Stone Circles, Phenomenology, and the Neolithic Mind', is necessarily more speculative than the others, and deals with the British Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, when the building of megalithic structures was at its height. It makes comparisons with Greek and Mesopotamian notions of the importance of the sky in ancient religious thought.

In addition to Adrian Moore, I thank Cis van Heertum and Stephanie Papadopolous, who, one way or another, are responsible for the existence of three of the essays in this book. I am also grateful to Alvin Plantinga for allowing a copy of *The Sacred History Being* to land on his desk.

Thomas Yaeger, June 10, 2018.

The essays are summarised below.

<u>The Enlightenment of David Hume.</u> Though Hume's empirical approach was not wholly successful, some of his intuitions expanded our collective understanding of how we perceive reality – for example, his insight that we

have no actual knowledge of the process of causation at all, and only a customary expectation of causal process, was a powerful one. We can describe causal processes, we can differentiate the nature of different causal processes, and we can formulate rules in connection with them, but we cannot know how causality itself operates, or even be sure that a perceived causal relation, often observed before, will obey the implicit rule the next time it is under scrutiny by us. However, it is no longer clear that Hume was exploring his mental processes and understanding entirely within the framework of western secular thought.

The Death of Socrates. It is a puzzle that, in the midst of a thoroughly polytheistic culture in Athens, with its plethora of gods, its many cults and priesthoods in the service of those gods, that both Socrates and Plato could speak of 'god' in the singular. Our difficulty here is the result of a modern understanding of the significance of polytheism, which sees the phenomenon as the inevitable precursor to monotheistic belief, which excludes other gods from consideration, or credibility. For modern scholars, polytheistic belief in ancient Greece was something which developed, higgeldy-piggeldy, out of a plethora of local and tribal deities, much embellished with myths about their lives and actions, which served important social functions, but which had no universal meaning, and were not rooted in a model of reality which embraced consideration of what the nature of reality itself might be.

The Irrationality of Atheism Atheists do not deny the existence of the world, its laws and properties: they just argue that the concept of God is not required to accept the world, and to have an understanding of it. But this leaves them at a loss to explain how the world came to be, and why it should have come into existence.

Richard Dawkins and Deism. Modern atheism is actually dependent for its nature on the ontological argument, and the terms in which it is framed. Meaning that eight hundred years of argument about the nature and existence of God underpins the point of view of those who regard themselves as atheists. Dawkins makes a distinction in 'The God Delusion' between theism and deism. Theism is a pattern of belief which enshrines the idea that the Divine is responsive to man, and his rituals of worship and

prayer. It is a pattern of belief dependent on the idea that God can act in the world. By contrast, deism contemplates the idea that a creator God has existence, and necessarily created the world, but that he is not active in the physical world beyond that. This essay argues that Dawkins is in fact a modern deist rather than an atheist.

Contra Plantinga. I sent two emails to Alvin Plantinga which outlined the implications of the extensive criticism of the traditional ontological argument, published in *The Sacred History of Being*. These mails are reproduced here.

Distinguishing Belief and Faith. Modern scholarship has a track record of making easy assumptions about the continuity of religious ideas and patterns of practice, and the accompanying social compacts. At the time the Assyrian palaces, temples and cities were being dug from the sand and soil in northern Mesopotamia, it was assumed that the relationship between the royal and temple establishments could be understood in terms of a modern division between church and state. This notion turned out to hold very little water on close analysis. It is also the case that belief is not a conspicuous feature of ancient religions.

Logic, Sophistry, and the Esoteric in Ancient Education. Both Plato and Aristotle's writings contain arguments which either don't make clear logical sense within themselves, or in the context of the rest of the work. Sometimes the clues to the meaning of arguments are present elsewhere in the canons of both Plato and Aristotle, and some of them clearly involve an esoteric level of understanding. The whole body of their outputs need to be taken on board in order to grasp the meaning of individual works. This is usually not done with the works of Aristotle: his *Historia Animalium* is read by biologists and specialists in animal taxonomies, but usually they read little else of his work.

Beyond Mathematics and Geometry. The process of separating ourselves from an interpretation of the world in terms of simple apprehension is driven initially by the practical necessities of our existence. But this process does not need to stop there. Intelligence consists in being able to adjust the categories of our understanding so that we do not mistake one thing for another. It is a mental development which might have no end. This is

essentially how Kant understood human intellectual development, which he framed (in his *Prolegomena*) in terms of a general theory of *a priori* concepts, not based on empirical sense data, or even a mathematical or geometric understanding of anything in the world.

Evading the Infinite. This chapter is a critical response to Adrian W. Moore's radio series 'The History of the Infinite', broadcast by the BBC in the autumn of 2016, and his book 'The Infinite', published in the early 90s. His treatment of the subject hardly references Plato at all. Adding Plato to the discussion changes the way in which the argument should be framed, which is what I've done in this essay. The actual infinite is the principal source of ancient ideas concerning the divine, not Aristotle's potential infinite, so Moore's argument concerning our knowledge of God is forced to take refuge in the quasi-mystical Calvinistic idea of a 'sensus divinitatis'. His argument also makes it impossible to understand Kant's treatment of religion.

The Esoteric Conception of Divinity in the Ancient World. In my twenties, I was struck by the strong interest the ancients had in the idea of limit – in art, architecture, philosophy, and ritual. This interest did not much seem to engage modern scholarly attention, with a couple of notable exceptions. Initially I had no idea at all what the significance of the idea of limit might be, and no idea where pursuing it would take me. Or that it would lead to a book it would take me four years to write, and which would reshape my understanding of human intellectual history in the process.

Unwritten Doctrine, Ancient Silence. It is often assumed by students of antiquity that there is no special importance to be attached to remarks that certain items of information are to be kept secret and not imparted to the unworthy, and to the ordinary mortal. This assumption is based on the presumption that there was, and is not, anything about which it is impossible to speak, before those not used to dealing with information about religion and the divine. This is a curiosity of modern times, in that the ignorance of theology among the moderns makes it impossible for them to credit the importance of theology in antiquity - both to those who understood its subtleties and and those who didn't.

Ancient Conjectures, and Fictive Intellectual History. Plato argues that we should always look to the 'one true thing'. Whereas J.G. Frazer argued that questions concerning Being ('the one true thing') were entirely barren, since nothing could be predicated of Being. This of course is a spectacular instance of intellectual blindness, by which the richness of the intellectual matrix of ancient Greek thought was spirited into nothingness. In antiquity, nods were made toward the notion that the discipline of philosophy might not have been first developed in Greece, including (tellingly) at the beginning of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Philosophers*. Plato after all argued against the idea that philosophy was invented by the Greeks in the *Protagoras*, saying that it was of a great age – perhaps contemporary with the arrival of peoples from Egypt, who settled in the Peloponnese, and also in Crete.

What is Sacred, and what is Profane? Each of the divine names of Marduk, the head of the Mesopotamian pantheon, has a description, and each of the lesser gods can be understood as abstractions of aspects of the rational creation. They represent excellences in the world. Marduk represents the sum total of these. This is the clue to understanding much of the ancient understanding what the divine is. Each described excellence resembles reality itself in terms of its properties. The excellence may serve social functions, as does a skill or specialism, but it should be performed for its own sake. The performance of these excellences recalls the perfection and completeness of the plenum, and was understood to reinforce the presence of the divine in the world.

Intentionality, Conjecture, and What is Holy. Intentionality explains why the ancients created a multiplicity of gods. If the divine itself cannot by definition be completely defined and understood, at least certain properties and attributes can be understood. These can therefore be defined and named as ways of accessing the divine. This does not at all conflict with the idea that the reality of the divine is in question. Instead this view argues that there is in fact a subjective component in the reality of the divine, at least insofar as it is possible for us to have commerce with it.

Excellence and the Knowledge of Divine Things. Plutarch opens his life of Alexander with a cheerful complaint about the sheer extent of the materials available to him to write on Alexander. So the details which are in his essay are there because he regarded them as important in showing Alexander's character, his disposition, and the content of his mind. On the basis of his sources he says that it is thought that Alexander was taught by Aristotle not only his doctrines of Morals and Politics, but also those more abstruse mysteries which are only communicated orally and are kept concealed from the vulgar: for after he had invaded Asia, hearing that Aristotle had published some treatises on these subjects, he wrote him a letter in which he defended the practice of keeping these speculations secret.

Egypt in the Shadows. Since the European enlightenment, the influence of Egypt on the development of abstract and philosophical thought has been deprecated. Yet, as Martin Bernal showed in the third volume of *Black Athena*, many Greek words have plausible etymologies from Egyptian. It is also the case that several of the concepts used by Aristotle in his philosophical writing were known to Egyptians nine hundred years before his time, such as the idea of completion (it is connected with the idea of birth in Akhenaten's Hymn to the Aten, which dates to the fourteenth century B.C.E). There is also abundant evidence for the existence of philosophical thought among the Hebrews in the books of the Old Testament. Yahweh is described as 'the first and last, and beside me there is no God'. His name (minus the vowels) is a variant of the verb 'to be', which suggests that his isolation is due to the fact that he was understood to be Being itself.

Polytheism, Monotheism, and the Cult of the Aten. The Aten is first mentioned (to our knowledge) in the Story of Sinuhe, which dates at least as far back as the twelfth dynasty, where the dead king is described as uniting with with the sun-disk in the heavens. Akhenaten's iconography never shows the god in anthropomorphic form – instead the Aten is always shown as the sun disk with rays of light extending from it, with hands at the end of each ray. The Sun god was considered to be neither male nor female, but both simultaneously, an idea which was reflected in the depiction of Akhenaten in sculpture and reliefs. His full title however was

‘The Re-Horus who rejoices in the horizon, in his/her Name of the Light which is seen in the sun disk’. We find this full rendering of the Aten’s name on the stelae placed around Akhetaten, which was Akhenaten’s newly founded capital. Sometimes the full name was shortened to Re-Horus-Aten, or just ‘Aten’. Since two of the names of Akhenaten’s god refer to the sun (Re being an older name for the sun god), it seems that some kind of intellectual synthesis of older ideas had taken place.

Cultural Continuity in the Ancient World, and Bernal’s *Black Athena*. Martin Bernal’s intention was take ancient Greece out of its exalted orbit above all other civilizations, and root it in what he assumed to have been a cultural continuum around the Mediterranean sea from at least the mid-2nd century B.C.E up until the classical period of Greece in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C.E. Bernal pointed to the evidence within the texts of the 1st millennium which suggested cultural continuities with ancient Egypt – all dismissed by the classicists in favour of evidence in texts which could be interpreted as suggesting the opposite. Bernal’s attempts to establish cultural continuity with the civilizations around the Mediterranean were hampered by the fact that myths are not simply encodings of historical and political change, and that the exchange of words between linguistic groups is, by itself, weak evidence for cultural continuity.

The Tangled Thread: Universals in History. The liturgies and the description of ancient rituals have been published and translated, and their signifcance and meaning have been discussed by scholars. But they make difficult reading for the reason that they involve a different set of preconceptions from those understood by modern scholars of Mesopotamia. It is hard to break through to an understanding of what was understood to be going on. The Mesopotamians employed ideas which they considered to be universally valid, such as all wisdom being present in the Abzu, and that the acquisition of knowledge depended on some kind of ritual engagement with Ea and the Abzu. And that the good order of the world depended on man's relation to the world of the divine. Since the European Enlightenment however, we have adopted another set of universal notions, which do not depend at all on the reality of the divine and the gods. In fact it pushes such notions into the shadowlands of unreason. So there is little inclination among scholars who specialise in Mesopotamia to spend time

trying to makes sense of things which they regard as intrinsically unreasonable.

The Age of the Lord Buddha. Scholars acquiesce in the convention that an articulate and technical understanding of the idea of Being was first broached by the Greeks in the middle of the 1st Millennium B.C.E. It follows therefore that all references to the divine in the ancient near east before that date are not articulate and technical references, but notional and inchoate. The consequence must be that we can learn nothing useful about ancient intellectual processes and concerns from these notions, since they are beliefs entirely unsupported by rational argument. This would come as a surprise to many ancient cultures, if they were still around. The date of the Buddha's floruit for western scholars is much closer to our own time than it is for scholars in the east. We place him around the 5th century B.C.E, since there is clearly an interest in universals in the texts. The *Puranas* provide a chronology of the Magadha rulers from the supposed time of the Mahabharata war, and Buddha is supposed to have become enlightened during the reign of Bimbisara, the 5th Shishunaga ruler, who, according to this chronology, ruled between 1852-1814 B.C.E. His birth date may have been 1887 B.C.E. Chinese scholarship has long maintained that Buddhism came to China from India around 1200-1100B.C.E.

Stone Circles, Phenomenology, and the Neolithic Mind. The evidence from the megaliths makes the importance of the sky very clear: in Britain and around the megalithic world, the sky was seen as a representation of divinity, of Being. As an image of the divine, it was an image of totality itself. The megalithic observatory, or temple, according to this hypothesis, was a device to embody aspects of divinity, of Being, actually in its structure, in the same way in which the gods in Mesopotamia might be invited to occupy their representations on earth.

The Enlightenment of David Hume

The Enlightenment agenda of the eighteenth century is based on the premise that human beings are rational beings in a causal world, which can be understood by the power of mathematics, physics, and the other sciences and disciplines which are based on human reason. The power of reason, it was assumed, is necessarily more powerful than all other forces which may exist in the world, and in the human mind. If this assumption was correct, then it should be possible not only to detect and defeat what is irrational in the world, but to eliminate its presence altogether. At least for all practical purposes.

The prioritization of the power of reason in the eighteenth century was based on a disdain for many (even most) of the elements of human experience throughout the thousands of years in which we lived in a quite different world. That world was full of darkness and ignorance, built on the basis of faulty ideas and associations; on mythopoeic patterns of thought, utilising groundless notions of the powers in nature. A world peopled by gods who needed to be appeased, and who could be propitiated by ritual human action; full of magical thinking, with demons and devils lurking at every turn.

According to this view, there was no reason in the world, until the emergence of classical civilisation in southern Europe in the middle years of the first millennium B.C.E.

I have cast doubt on this picture elsewhere. Yet there are elements of truth to it.

The Enlightenment agenda was developed in the context of a new understanding of the critical power of human thought, and also of the sciences. Newton showed that causality was the key to our world, and mathematics was the necessary toolkit for gaining an understanding of how the universe works. Without Newton's demonstration that mathematics could be deployed to describe the motions of the Moon and the planets, and the phenomenon of gravity as a universal force in the

cosmos, it is doubtful that the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century would have had the character it had.

The Enlightenment engagement with the visible and physical reality of the universe depended on an intelligible order present in the world, expressed in terms of causal relationships, and that man could frame his relationship with that ordered reality through mathematical and scientific inquiry. In which case, the development of the sciences was effectively the deployment of the human reason, carrying with it no baggage from the past which might skew our understanding. Religion and theology had no place in this new dispensation, despite the fact that Newton spent much of his time engaged with religious questions (a fact almost entirely unknown during the Enlightenment). It seemed obvious that there was no meaningful order in religion, which was now thought of in terms of the chief species of superstition. There was also no basis for believing in the reality of the divine, and no way in which the idea could survive scientific scrutiny.

The French writer Denis Diderot, and many others, considered that human reason could order human life on the basis of the nature of reason itself. We didn't need any of the things which now were deemed to be superstition or without any aspect of reason, which included many of the customary arrangements and practices in human society. In effect, the whole of the long history of civilisation became, to the savants of the Enlightenment, a sojourn in a world of stupidity and horror. The Enlightenment would build the world anew from scratch, and it would be about the improvement of the physical and intellectual condition of the human race.

This is the background to Diderot's Encyclopedia – it reflected the new understanding of the world, and the principles on which the new world would be built. Diderot made an exception for the crafts and trades. In addition to the intellectual life of man, the organisation of societal and customary relations in human life, the crafts were part of the fabric of living and understanding. Swathes of the crafts and trades might once have been wrapped up in elements of folklore and superstition, and from the earliest times, but their practicality was what was important. So the crafts

could be stripped of their ancient accretions and described and defined anew, as what they were in terms of their contribution to human life.

In short, the achievement of a wholly secular enlightenment, which is what the enterprise of the European Enlightenment was all about, required the thorough redefinition of the past, and what the elements of that past meant. The improved state of man required a wholesale rewriting of human intellectual and social history. Old ideas would end their days on the scrapheap.

In Scotland (although the enterprise began in France), Hume's contribution to the Enlightenment was rather different. Hume considered the idea that important aspects of the human reason could be understood by the introduction of the experimental method (as he understood it) into psychological subjects. He was essentially experimenting on himself, and exploring the scope and possibilities of his own thoughts. Whereas Diderot's enterprise was to reshape the world in terms of a rational understanding of how things work, Hume was revising and rebuilding himself in terms of how the rational mind works.

Though Hume's approach was not wholly successful, some of his intuitions expanded our collective understanding of how we perceive reality – for example, his insight that we have no actual knowledge of the process of causation at all, and only a customary expectation of causal process, was a powerful one. We can describe causal processes, we can differentiate the nature of different causal processes, and we can formulate rules in connection with them, but we cannot know how causality itself operates, or even be sure that a perceived causal relation, often observed before, will obey the implicit rule the next time it is under scrutiny by us.

However, it is no longer clear that Hume was exploring his mental processes and understanding entirely within the framework of western secular thought, which is what the European Enlightenment was supposed to be about. In 2009 Alison Gopnik published an article in *Hume Studies* (Volume 35, Number 1 & 2, 2009 pp. 5-28) which suggested that Hume may have had an important encounter with Buddhist thought while residing and writing at La Flèche in France. Gopnik also wrote engagingly

about her research (and its context) later on in an article in the *Atlantic* magazine (October 2015 issue).

This is the abstract for the article published in *Hume Studies*:

> Philosophers and Buddhist scholars have noted the affinities between David Hume's empiricism and the Buddhist philosophical tradition. I show that it was possible for Hume to have had contact with Buddhist philosophical views. The link to Buddhism comes through the Jesuit scholars at the Royal College of La Flèche. Charles François Dolu was a Jesuit missionary who lived at the Royal College from 1723-1740, overlapping with Hume's stay. He had extensive knowledge both of other religions and cultures and of scientific ideas. Dolu had had first-hand experience with Theravada Buddhism as part of the second French embassy to Siam in 1687-1688. In 1727, Dolu also had talked with Ippolito Desideri, a Jesuit missionary who visited Tibet and made an extensive study of Tibetan Buddhism from 1716-1721. It is at least possible that Hume heard about Buddhist ideas through Dolu.

What is Theravada Buddhism? Theravada is a Pali word, with the literal meaning of the 'school of the elder monks'. There is a Pali Canon of the teaching of the Buddha, and Theravada Buddhism uses those teachings as the basis of its doctrines. Theravada Buddhism is conservative in doctrine and in matters of monastic discipline. There is no other complete Buddhist canon of teachings surviving in a classic Indic language.

The sect originated in Sri Lanka, but is now found in many places around the whole of Southeast Asia.

Theravada Buddhism has some interesting ideas about the nature of causality (*Pratītyasamutpāda*). Causality, or the idea of cause and effect, is one of the most important ideas in Buddhism as a whole, as well as to the Theravada branch. It differs from western notions of causality, in that it understands cause and effect in terms of 'dependent co-arising' (which is what *Pratītyasamutpāda* means). In the Pali Canon, a differentiation is made between ideas of 'root cause' (hetu), and 'facilitating cause' (pacca).

Effects are brought about by a combined interaction of these two causes. Much of the logic of Buddhism is based on this view of causality.

The significance of this is that it provides explanation of the nature of suffering, and provides an understanding of how suffering may be escaped. This notion of causality also provides an obstacle to patterns of thought which argue for absolute and unquestionable beliefs concerning reality itself. The understanding is that the removal of a cause of something, will also remove the result. The logic of this way of looking at causality is that there is a path which can end both suffering and aimless existence (Samsara, which term can mean 'wandering' or 'world').

This is of course a very different conception of causality from the one we understand in the west. And it is an old idea. That cause produces an effect because a property belongs to something (svadha) appears in Vedic literature, which takes the idea back to the 2nd Millennium B.C.E., and is found in the *Rigveda* and the *Brahmanas*. *Pratītyasamutpāda* doctrine is more complex however, since it does not involve a single causality. The doctrine involves instead an indirect conditioned causality, and a plural causality.

Hume's famous image of our understanding of causality is of billiard balls, and how their behaviour can be predicted. This is the Newtonian model of causality. Hume's insight was that though we could describe and predict their behaviour, we had no idea what was actually behind the behaviour on the billiard table. We know how they behaved a year ago. And how they behaved a week ago. But we have nothing but customary experience to indicate that the same behaviour will happen today.

In Buddhism, the concept of causality implies a plurality of causes which co-originate phenomena. So one thing implies another. This is the basis of the idea of Karma, where the causes can co-originate phenomena both within lifetimes, and across lifetimes. So, what happens in one life can create the necessary conditions which may result in rebirth in another realm of existence for a different lifetime. This is based on the idea of a 'dependent co-arising'

Peter Harvey argued in 1990 that *Pratītyasamutpāda* is an ontological principle. Meaning that it is a theory which can provide an explanation for 'the nature and relations of being, becoming, existence and ultimate reality'. All that stands by itself is the state of Nirvana. Everything which has existence and multiplicity does not not stand alone, but depends on and arises from pre-existing states. When they cease, other dependent states arise. It does not matter whether we are talking about physical or mental states. 'Dependent arisings' therefore have a causal conditioning. In which case, *Pratītyasamutpāda* is the basis of the Buddhist understanding of the nature of reality itself. It is Buddhism's ontology.

So dependent origination is deemed necessary and sufficient according to the principle of *Pratītyasamutpāda.* In *Majjhima Nikaya* this idea is expressed as follows:

> *When this is, that is; This arising, that arises; When this is not, that is not; This ceasing, that ceases.*

If Hume had discussions with the Jesuits at La Flèche about Buddhist ideas concerning the nature of reality, he may well have encountered Buddhist views on the nature of causality. In which case, his observation of the unfathomability of the nature of causal relations becomes extremely interesting. He may have understood that the Buddhist view of causality is an ontological one, in that it understands the nature of causality in terms of 'this being so, that being so', and does not require the concept of a creator god, a transcendent creative principle, or the notion of a first cause of any kind. This kind of concept of causality refers to conditions created by a plurality of causes that necessarily co-originate phenomena. It is what happens when you do not simply have the one thing, but a multiplicity of entities, which have properties of their own.

So it is possible that Hume's lack of interest in Plato (he wrote one page about Plato in his volume of Essays), does not mean he had no substantial interest in ontological questions, but perhaps that he understood ontology to be a matter of causality, rather than a transcendent creative principle, about which we might be able to say very little. This does not make Hume a Buddhist by any means, and I am not suggesting that he was. But it does

suggest the possibility that there is a hinterland of Hume's thought and influences still to be explored.

Are there obvious parallelisms between Hume's thought and Theravada Buddhism? 'Dependent arisings' with causal conditioning, of course, need to be established and understood if suffering is to be avoided. In Buddhism, this becomes a key function of scholarship and the priesthood. If there is some condition or state which is unwanted, that state is caused by the pre-existence of something else, and to alter that state involves the removal of the thing which pre-exists. This opens up a whole realm for speculation about 'why this is so', and 'why this is not so', using the concepts of root cause, and facilitating causes. It is also a way of understanding which is necessarily conjectural in approach, inimical to any belief system which has a fixed mindset, or postulates absolute beliefs about the nature of reality. Within such an intellectual model of how things are related, things can be conjectured to be the case, but relationships can also be analysed, and disputed. So Theravada Buddhism has a form of scepticism built in to the way it deals with reality (the schisms in early Buddhism point to this characteristic very strongly).

Which is where we find the intellectual outlook of Hume. Sceptical, with no absolute beliefs about the nature of reality. Prepared to inquire into the limits of human understanding, but not to attach himself to any thought which has not been critically examined, and which, even so, must always and necessarily remain a matter of conjecture.

The Death of Socrates

This is one of the most famous speeches in the world. But is also one of the most difficult to comprehend fully, since two and half thousand years stand between ourselves and its original cultural context.

We do not know for sure what Socrates said when he was condemned to death: what we have is mediated through the writing of his pupil Plato. And it reads very much as the sort of speech he might have given if he had been unfortunate enough to find himself in similar circumstances. Socrates was also written about by Xenophon, but the Socrates who appears in his pages is sometimes difficult to recognise as the Socrates that Plato writes about. So there is an element of fiction in the portrait which Plato gives. This is not uncommon in ancient writing: Thucydides relates many speeches in his history of the Peloponnesian War which he could not have heard, and which were mostly not recorded in any detail. Instead, he relates what *should have been said* on the occasion, by those historical figures he was writing about. Plato was present at the time of Socrates' trial, and did know what Socrates actually said. But unlike Socrates, he was often greatly circumspect, and by that means avoided conflict with the civic authorities in Athens. He is being circumspect here, and so the speech requires some decoding.

In replying to his judges, Socrates does not explicitly refer to the content of the charges, which were that he showed disrespect for the gods, and that through his conversations with the young, which were sometimes about the gods, he corrupted them. His objection to their judgement is based on two things – their misunderstanding of what Socrates was doing with his life, and their lack of regard for truth.

Socrates does refer to God however, at the end of his speech, and without irony. Only God himself knows whether what Socrates says about being dead and living forever in eternity is true, or not. His impiety was to the gods of the Greeks, whose existence and reality he sometimes doubted in public, rather than 'God' in the singular. Plato likewise sometimes spoke of the Divine in the singular (*ho theos*) in his dialogues, but when talking about the plurality of the gods, he defers all questions of whether or not

they are real to members of those Athenian families who claim to be descended from them, on the grounds that they should know the truth or otherwise of the claim better than anyone else.

It may seem slightly puzzling that, in the midst of a thoroughly polytheistic culture in Athens, with its plethora of gods, its many cults and priesthoods in the service of those gods, that both Socrates and Plato could speak of 'god' in the singular. Our difficulty here is the result of a modern understanding of the significance of polytheism, which sees the phenomenon as the inevitable precursor to monotheistic belief, which excludes other gods from consideration, or credibility. For modern scholars, polytheistic belief in ancient Greece was something which developed, higgeldy-piggeldy, out of a plethora of local and tribal deities, much embellished with myths about their lives and actions, which served important social functions, but which had no universal meaning, and were not rooted in a model of reality which embraced consideration of what the nature of reality itself might be, or what constitutes 'truth'.

In this modern model of what polytheism was in Greece, gods could be moved from place to place because their functions and significances were adaptable to local social, ideological and political circumstances, and changes of fortune among noble families. They also could have many birthplaces, as Zeus did.

Yet a close reading of several of Plato's dialogues, in which Socrates makes several appearances, often as the main protagonist, shows that two of the main concerns in these dialogues is the nature of reality itself, and what constitutes 'truth'. The routes taken in each of the dialogues, and the language used to discuss these subjects, is different, but the same underlying theme is present. Socrates is addressing both of these issues in his final speech.

What is the nature of 'reality itself' as discussed in Plato's dialogues? Scholars often represent Plato as having no doctrinal and unchanging beliefs in the course of his writing: however, we are told of the nature of reality in several places, and reality itself is described by Plato as the goal of those who 'love wisdom' (which is of course the literal translation of the term 'philosophy'). It is given a name, 'The Good.' It is to be approached

very gradually, in the mind alone, through many imperfect representations of what it is, until eventually it becomes possible to apprehend its nature. The philosopher then descends via the same chain of imperfect images, which possess less reality than reality itself (since they are by definition imperfect). Only by approaching what is ultimately real, and what is ultimately true, can true knowledge be acquired.

This is the ultimate source of the charge of impiety: for Socrates, the plethora of gods simply were imperfect representations of the singularity of the transcendent God. They might serve as approaches to the Divine, but he would be guilty of untruthfulness if he accorded them the same honour as he gave to the transcendent God.

We are told by Socrates himself, in one of Plato's dialogues. that the nature of that ultimate reality has 'no size, colour or form', and is beyond all physical representation. It is not located anywhere in the physical world. Despite the inevitable difficulty in accessing it, Plato refers to it several times as 'the one thing' which should be the focus of human attention. By characterising it in this way, Plato is making an equation between death, the afterlife, the nature of reality, God, and eternity. They all transcend the world of the here and now.

When Socrates speaks of 'eternity', we read the use of the word as a literary convention, and as a metaphor, because we have no real understanding of the meaning of eternity in modern times. It is based on the concept of the plenum, which was once an important idea in philosophy. It is the idea that behind the world of appearances, there exists a primordial fullness, which transcends day to day reality, and which is the ultimate source of all kinds of abundance, and all good things.

Scholars for the most part don't associate this idea with Plato and Socrates, though they concede it is a key idea in later forms of Platonism. But it is there. The concept of eternity used to have this technical substratum, which sees the physical world as being drawn from a level of reality where all things are possible, and all things which might exist, already exist as possibilities.

So when Socrates speaks of future conversations with the great men and the heroes of Greece, he is talking about travelling to a place where these heroes always live, because everything which can come to be is already present in eternity. Socrates does not know whether this understanding of eternity is true, but in any case, once he is dead he will be beyond the travails of earthly existence.

The hardest thing for us to understand about this is that Socrates thought of his death in terms of a return to health, and consequently, that he regarded his physical existence as a form of ill-health. For him, real existence is something which is elsewhere, and not here. Return to that transcendent existence he understood as a form of release from the tribulations of physical life. This is why he asked his followers to sacrifice a cock to Asclepius, the god of healing, to mark his passing.

The Irrationality of Atheism

The word atheism is constructed from the Greek word for God, ‘theos.’ God was spoken of by Plato as ‘ho theos,’ meaning ‘the god’. With the addition of the Greek privative particle, we have ‘atheos’, meaning ‘no god,’ or ‘godless.’

So, one might imagine that the derived term ‘atheism’ is a legitimate pair with ‘theism,’ the one indicated the idea of no god, and the other the idea of God. You can be inclined to one or the other according to your disposition, your culture, or your education. Both are apparently rational concepts, and both can be used in rational argument.

It is peculiar that Plato spoke of the creator of the world (though the actual work of the creation was done by the demiourgos, in order that there should not be too much of the divine about the world) as ‘the God’, which seems to imply a single divinity. The Greeks were polytheists, with a large pantheon of gods, and many stories about the gods’ lives and relationships. They paid divine honours to them at their birthplaces and their shrines, and sacrificed to them. So the idea of ’ho theos’ needs to be explained. I will return to this interesting question later in this essay.

Atheism, in the sense of not believing in god or the gods, or giving the idea of them any credence, is an idea which is very old. The people who ransacked ancient tombs and holy places in antiquity, did not show reverence to those places, their contents, or the gods who were honoured by them.

It is easy to understand how the idea that the gods or divinity were not in any sense real might have come about. Ordinarily at least, we do not see them, and we do not see them act. We do not hear them talk, or give advice. They are for the most part invisible to mortal man. What we have are stories about them, places venerated as the place of their birth, and their holy sites. All of which could have been made up by the priests who honour them, and maintained the divine cults. Their images in wood, metal and stone were made by mortal craftsmen, after the pattern of the descriptions of the divine in poetry and myth. Many of these divine cults

had become extremely rich over centuries of patronage by rich benefactors and many pious pilgrimages to their shrines. The show spoke of unimaginable wealth. But the gods themselves were nowhere to be seen.

So an intelligent individual might come to the conclusion that the pomp and circumstance of holy ritual and temple life, most of which took place behind closed doors, was a fiction devised by the priestly cults, in order to maintain their own wealth and power.

This is one side of the story – the part which it is easy for us to understand. The cults create stories and images around the idea of the gods, and gain power and prestige for themselves and their gods. The intelligent individual does not know anything of the mechanics or the purpose of the fiction. He simply has no reason to treat the divine as something real.

Some other intelligent individual, having been at one time a neophyte in one of the divine cults in the ancient world, will have known something of the details of the fiction. But as a disbeliever in the reality of the gods, it does not matter to him what there might be to understand. His mind is made up. The complexity of the myths and rituals mean nothing, and suggest nothing to him which he would benefit from knowing.

Of course, it is possible to object to the reality of the gods, while holding to the idea that a single god is real. This view might be arrived at by a form of logical argument, along the lines of: only God is real, everything else is illusory. This is the view that the author of the *Book of Enoch* took. In which case the apparent and iconoclastic atheism of the individual is actually the extreme expression of the idea that there can be only one God.

In this case, everything apart from the idea of a single god, apparently divorced from the whole of the physical creation, and the representation of other aspects of the divine through sculpture, ritual and cult, is illusory and false. The representations might be ascribed to the work of demons, who strive to distract us from our proper purpose, which is to pay due honour to the one god.

The point I'm making here is that we have to be clear about what is in the mind of those who appear to be atheists. There are those who think that there is no such thing as the divine, and that the very idea of the divine is a

fictional presence in the world, created by those who are credulous, or who are cynically exploiting the credulity of the majority of mankind (or both). Most modern atheists are of this kind.

Those who did not understand the origin and function of the various divine cults in the ancient world, and rejected them, but who embraced the idea of a single god, were not atheists. They were simply against the plurality of the gods. They too could destroy temples, shrines and statues of the gods, but had the notion of a purer 'cultus deorum' in their heads.

We can describe these individuals as monolaters or monotheists, though they are not the same. The monolaters follow one god, however they arrived at the notion. Their single god does not need to have a philosophical aspect, by which its singleness is put beyond question. Monotheism however does imply the presence of a degree of philosophical debate around the uniqueness of god. In the Book of Malachi for example, Jehovah is presented as saying 'I do not change'. So the Hebrew god is beyond a political and tribal conception.

Returning as I said, to the question of Plato's term for God, 'ho theos', it is clear that his conception of God is purely philosophical, as we might expect. Referred to in the Platonic dialogues as 'the Good', God is is described by his master Socrates (himself accused of impiety towards the Gods) as having 'no form, shape or colour', and we know from other parts of Plato's work that 'ho theos' has a nature which is beyond change. His nature is transcendent of all the categories of experience and understanding.

Plato is writing about a God who is in fact *Reality itself*, in that the properties and attributes of his god are *identical with the properties and attributes of his understanding of transcendent reality*. We cannot see it, measure it, and it has no presence in the secular world as itself. It would be easy to jump to the conclusion that this conception of Reality is equivalent to the conception of a nothingness, a void, and an absence. This conclusion would be foolish: I've written elsewhere of the notion of Reality as a plenum, as something which is undefined and unlimited, and which is beyond the conception of something which is absent. Absence implies presence, and transcendent Reality is beyond both absence and presence.

Atheism can mean many things, but ordinarily it means the lack of a belief in God. Or rather the lack of a belief that God has some form of existence, or the property of being something which is real, as opposed to a figment of the human imagination. But consider, if the definition of God is Reality itself, and not an entity which just occupies some part of the universe and has powers and properties attributed to it, then the atheist is in effect denying the reality of a transcendent reality, which lies behind all the phenomena of the universe, its laws, its properties, and its very existence.

Atheists do not deny the existence of the world, its laws and properties: they just argue that the concept of God is not required to accept the world, and to have an understanding of it. They are of course at a loss to explain how the world came to be, and why it should have come into existence. They have no explanation for physical existence of anything, and no explanation for the existence of spatial dimensions and the phenomenon of time. These are not important questions for atheists in general, since the important point for them is that they are not credulous people, and not people who put their faith in the fictions which are promoted by most formal and informal religions, particularly in the modern west.

But if God is Reality itself, then to deny the reality of God is effectively to deny the reality of the world and everything in it. In which case even the illusion of the physical world can never be properly accepted or explained. Atheism itself is therefore a form of privation, in which nothing can make sense beyond the casual acceptance of physical reality, and about which no great questions can or should be asked, and where even the laws of the universe are the way they are for no reason that might be understood.

Richard Dawkins and Deism

Since the publication of *The God Delusion* in 2006, those of us who are interested in the history of ideas, both long and short, have got used to a more aggressive and even militant form of atheistic response to discussions of the concept of God, and the meaning of the Divine. Dawkins book is the main reason for this change.

'The God Delusion' is not a scholarly treatise on belief and disbelief concerning the existence or the reality of God, and the arguments for and against. Nor does it pretend to be. It is an old-fashioned piece of polemical writing, intended to serve an agenda which is already established. However, this has not stopped some of the readers of the book from imagining that it is in fact the last word on why every possible reason for entertaining the idea of God is delusory, and that anyone still discussing the subject of the Divine is an abject fool.

By writing this book, what Dawkins has done is to empower (in the jargon of the day) a large group of people who see any discussion of God as some sort of intellectual imposture. They see this for many possible reasons, including the fact that, perhaps most importantly, and in western religions in particular, the concept of God *has* been used to buttress temporal and political power, and many of the arguments which have been made in favour of the existence or the reality of God, over the past thousand years or so, do function as support for temporal ideologies. The disbelievers see such imposture as an offence against intelligence and common sense, and 'The God Delusion' contains the weaponry for combatting the deceit.

Dawkins is not a theologian. But this does not disqualify him from discussing the truth or falsehood of the existence of God, and the arguments which have been created in order to support what is known as 'rational belief in God'. I share Dawkins negative view of this unhappy concept, which gives space to credulous patterns of thought. However, Dawkins project would have been better served if he had produced a scholarly discussion of the subject first, before writing the polemic. By publishing only the polemic, he has himself created a space for credulous patterns of thought. Discussion of theological questions is now out of the seminary and the university, and is in the marketplace.

Some time ago, shortly after I published *The Sacred History of Being*, which discusses the long history of ideas about God and the Divine, I wrote a blog post with a misleading title 'The Irrationality of Atheism'. The article was actually about the illogical and careless nature of western human thought concerning the Divine. It pointed out three things:

> Can God, in any meaningful sense, be said to *exist*, even if God can be said to have reality? We think of existence as a characteristic of being in space and time.
>
> Secondly, that the ontological argument provides nothing which connects God with the matrix of space and time. This suggests the uncritical acceptance of space and time as something which exists apart from the Divine, and which is perhaps a fatal objection to the ontological argument.
>
> Thirdly, if the nature of what God is *includes* the generation of the space and time in which we live and think, then intelligent atheism is *impossible*, since it would necessarily mean the complete denial of human experience.

What I was suggesting was that modern atheism is actually dependent for its nature on the ontological argument, and the terms in which it is framed. Meaning that eight hundred years of argument about the nature and existence of God underpins the point of view of those who regard themselves as atheists.

Most of the time this article received little attention. At other times it did get a response – sometimes polite and intelligent, sometimes not. What struck me about the latter instances however, was how little the responders actually knew, as opposed to *how much they imagined they knew*, about theological questions. They'd read 'The God Delusion', and that was enough. The argument made sense to them, and they were as a consequence, militantly in favour in Dawkins point of view.

So much so that it was often clear that they were responding to the provocative *title* of the article, and had not read the article itself (far less any other article on the web site). There was *no need* for them to read the article, of course – they knew that, whatever was in it was nonsense, and that I must be confused, or just an attention seeker.

For many, modern atheism is now a belief system, like any other. Just dressed up as absolute unbelief. And Dawkins book is their sacred text. It makes sense. It is logical. It is the final word on the matter.

I found myself being accused of confusing theism and deism, which was a bit puzzling at first. But since the accusers have generally read Dawkins book and very little else, and therefore have no wide knowledge of the history of human thought, they necessarily take their cues from him. And Dawkins does spend a lot of time talking about both. We learn about Dawkins perspective from this, and so can gain an understanding of the limitations of his own argument.

I think of theism and deism as terms for patterns of thought which belong in the early modern period, and which are couched in the kind of discussions contemporary with that time, all the way up to the French revolution, and beyond. But earlier ideas about god can be understood in terms of theism (the word of course is Greek, as is its derivative *atheism*). But no-one in their right mind would try to equate the theism of Plato with the theism of the early modern period; they just aren't the same. Plato's 'theism' concerns a God who is wholly transcendent of physical existence, and transcends all sense experience. Theistic belief of later times implies no such thing.

The distinction Dawkins makes in 'The God Delusion' between theism and deism is a simple one. Theism is a pattern of belief which enshrines the idea that the Divine is responsive to man, and his rituals of worship and prayer. It is a pattern of belief dependent on the idea that God can act in the world. By contrast, deism contemplates the idea that a creator God has existence, and necessarily created the world, but that he is not active in the physical world beyond that.

This is the kind of idea which Descartes employed in his description of reality. God was real, but existed in a sphere of his own, and so we could get on with the business of understanding the world in terms of mathematics and physics, without reference to God. The idea was also attractive to the generation of theologians and scholars who came after Newton, who saw the divine hand in the regular clockwork of the heavens, the motions of the planets, and approved of Newton's use of mathematics to describe the regularity of the cosmos. Their very regularity could be argued to show that God created the physical and sensory world, but did not intervene once the cosmos was in order, and in motion.

In October 2008, Dawkins debated with the mathematician John Lennox at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History. The debate had the title 'Has Science buried God?', In the debate Dawkins made an interesting statement, which puts him on this theist-deist spectrum, at least in so far as he recognises that the laws of mathematics and physics have to have some origin. He said that, though *he would not accept deism*, it was possible to make the case for "a deistic god, a sort of god of the physicist…. Who devised the laws of physics, god the mathematician, god who put together the cosmos in the first place and then sat back and watched everything happen" *1. He had however no notion that a similar case could be made for a theistic god.

So, if Dawkins is not in fact a deist, where does he think the laws of mathematics and physics come from? What is the origin of the inverse square law, and the law of gravity? He clearly accepts mathematical order in physical reality, since you cannot understand or do science if you don't. So it seems as though Dawkins objections to deism are irrational, and that he is a deist masquerading as the high-priest of atheism.

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1. Dawkins view of at least the *possibility* of a mathematically inclined god, who defined the rules, and set everything in motion, would have made perfect sense to the Stoics, including the Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius, who understood the world principally in terms of the power of Necessity (*anangke*). The world was in motion according to a predetermined pattern, against which man's powers were feeble in the extreme. We could change certain things here and there, but we had to accept the implacable force of Necessity.

Contra Plantinga

I wrote to Alvin Plantinga on Sunday, 2nd of July 2017, concerning the ontological argument, which he has done so much to promote:

> I imagine ... that you would be interested to see alternative arguments for the reality of the divine, were these to exist.
>
> And they do exist. I spent many years assembling the arguments for the understanding of the divine in the ancient world. These are quite different arguments from those offered from St. Anselm onwards.
>
> You are under no obligation at all to read my book, but it may be worth a look, if only to dismiss the arguments as threadbare, or even completely baseless. And in short order.
>
> If you are interested in reading the book, I will send it to you either as an ebook or a pdf, according to your choice. You are under no obligation at all to respond, if you accept the book.

I didn't get a response from that, so I wrote again on 18th of July, 2017:

> The ontological argument has obviously been important and highly influential over the past thousand years. But I argue that, in any of its instances, it is not sound, and does not resemble argument about the divine in the ancient world. I've written about this issue in detail in *The Sacred History of Being*, which was published in 2015.
>
> I think we have come to the end of a road with the ontological argument, which has profoundly influenced the history of philosophy, theology, and the development of anthropology. Ancient discussion of the divine was based on logical argument about the nature of a transcendent reality, which gave rise to space and time, rather than the more constrained question of whether or not God exists in a pre-existing and unexplained

> frame. Mesopotamia provides the intellectual background for the development of public philosophy in Greece. I will send you my book by email if you are interested in reading an alternative view.

Professor Plantinga was kind enough to accept the offer of a copy of my book, and a PDF was sent by email the next day. I followed up on the exchange on the 19th of September:

> Some useful things can be taken away from the arguments in *The Sacred History of Being*. First of all, if the Divine and Reality are not artificially separated from each other (they are usually coterminous in eastern thought), then atheism is unreasonable and almost unthinkable. This separation is a characteristic of western philosophy, after the closure of the schools. Plato does not argue like this. Neither do the Neoplatonists.
>
> The importance of belief is less important when the Divine and Reality itself are not understood to be separate. In ancient religion (if we insist on referring to the phenomenon with that term, rather than using Cicero's more appropriate phrase 'cultus deorum'), belief was mostly beside the point, being subordinate to observance, if you understood the basis of what was being discussed. Belief is a phenomenon which assumes importance when a population does not know the traditional arguments concerning what is Divine, and the speculative and conjectural conclusions which might be drawn from those arguments.
>
> This was the case by the time Anselm put together his version of the ontological argument. Faith is slightly different, since it isn't the same as blind belief, but signifies an understanding of why certain arguments are made, and an acceptance of the scope of what they suggest. The possibility of conjecture and discussion remains.
>
> How does Plato argue about the nature of the Divine? He understood the Divine to be beyond physical space, and the dimension of time. Without shape and colour, or any other characteristic which could be easily understood by the human

mind. However, and paradoxically, the Divine was capable of participation in the world, because some aspects of the Divine have exemplars on earth. Such as totality, greatness, perfection, completeness, etc. The nature of the Divine emerges from a number of philosophical questions, such as: if the Divine is one, how is the many possible? If the Divine is one and beyond change, but God needs to make a copy of it in which movement is possible, has the integrity of the nature of the ur-reality been fatally compromised? If the one thing which we should all look to is, by definition, one and unchanging (see the self-description of God in the 3rd book of Malachi, where God says: 'I do not change'), how is participation in the world of movement and change possible?

And so on. Frazer wrote these arguments off as 'popular questions of the day', with no more significance than that. A rational basis for belief, is I think, a contradiction in terms. If it is rational, then belief is unecessary. A key conclusion of *The Sacred History of Being*, is that the basis of ancient religion was the acquisition of knowledge of the Divine, and as a corollary, the acquisition of knowledge itself, since it was understood to be already present in the Divine (an idea most clearly expressed in Mesopotamian literature and liturgy).

We lost almost all of that in the west, except in rhetorical and literary terms. But the evidence from antiquity does not support either the necessity of belief in religion, or the necessity of God possessing the property of existence within an unexplained and inexplicable pre-existence of space and time, The evidence from antiquity *does* support the reality of God, and the importance of the reality of the Divine in every aspect of human existence.

Of course if the Greeks did invent philosophical argument and sound logic, and no-one else around the Mediterranean and the ancient Near East was able to think about the Divine in such terms as far back as the middle of 2nd Millennium B.C.E., when they were building their accounts of the nature of reality, then this

argument would be impossible to support. I would suggest instead, that the argument be reversed, as it can be, however much the classicists and the historians of philosophy would object to the loss of Greek intellectual primacy which would result.

Best regards, Thomas Yaeger

Distinguishing Belief and Faith

I first found these passages by the writer on eastern philosophies Alan Watts, through reading an article on the Brainpickings site by Maria PopovaHer original post concerned Watts' book, *The Wisdom of Insecurity: a Message for An Age of Anxiety*, first published in 1951.

Watts points out (in his idiosyncratic way) that belief and faith can come to mean things quite opposite to each other:

> We must here make a clear distinction between belief and faith, because, in general practice, belief has come to mean a state of mind which is almost the opposite of faith. Belief, as I use the word here, is the insistence that the truth is what one would …. wish it to be. The believer will open his mind to the truth on the condition that it fits in with his preconceived ideas and wishes. Faith, on the other hand, is an unreserved opening of the mind to the truth, whatever it may turn out to be. Faith has no preconceptions; it is a plunge into the unknown. Belief clings, but faith lets go. In this sense of the word, faith is the essential virtue of science, and likewise of any religion that is not self-deception.
>
> Both belief and faith are states of mind. But they can represent quite different orientations of mind. The first is about what is held in the mind, and is treated as real, the second is about a constancy of receptiveness to the truth. Of course the believer will believe that what is believed is the truth, and will be persuaded that it is believed on that account. Those who have faith by contrast, do not have to hold anything in the mind, any doctrine, any preconceptions.
>
> The believer may label his belief as his faith, and quite probably not distinguish the two. So much of history has been warped by such conflations. The modern religions (by which I mean those that have managed to survive into modern times, not that they are modern) invoke faith as part of the package which is offered to their members. Faith and belief are rarely distinguished, in part

because of the social and political roles of these modern religions. The blurring is often useful.

We can often see this in practice, when a great quantity of doctrine has to be memorized by the believer, which is treated as a pillar of the faith. Or where strict patterns of behaviour and observance are demanded. Most of the major religions are guilty of this kind of imposition.

Modern scholarship has a track record of making easy assumptions about the continuity of religious ideas and patterns of practice, and the accompanying social compacts. So at the time the Assyrian palaces, temples and cities were being dug from the sand and soil in northern Mesopotamia, it was assumed that the relationship between the royal and temple establishments could be understood in terms of a modern division between church and state, in the way that the Church of England is separate from the English throne and government. This notion turned out to hold very little water on close analysis. And even now, around a century and a half later, it is still difficult to understand the relationship between the two establishments, though clearly the relationship was an important one. The king performed an important ritual role in the religious life of Assyria, as we can see from many of the palace reliefs, and this role is recorded in the surviving documents from the middle of the 1st millennium B.C.E. The priests performed an important role in the political life of the state as well as in the conduct of religious ritual.

Except that there were no priests. At least not as such. There were many religious functionaries of course, which were initially described as priests by scholars. But in the cuneiform texts they were generally referred to in terms of their function. So the functionary involved in divination would be referred to as the Asipu, rather than the Asipu priest. A small seeming distinction, until you know more about the structure of the royal court and something of the Assyrian understanding of the world. One of the functionaries was referred to simply as the 'baker'. It is hard to imagine such a figure and status in any modern religion.

So it is unwise therefore to describe Assyrian religion as a belief system. Or indeed any of the pre-Abrahamic religions as belief systems, unless we can be absolutely sure that there is some level of comparability present with modern religions.

We know something of the stratification of Assyrian society in connection with religious ideas, partly from the colophons of liturgical texts. These were sometimes explicitly marked as not for the sight or discussion of the uninitiated. One temple text which is discussed in *The Sacred History of Being* says that the initiated may read the text and discuss their understanding of its meaning among themselves. Others may read and know the names of the gods only. Nothing was explained to this second order of readers, at least not anything connected with the subsurface meaning of the text.

This of course refers to those members of the population who were educated enough to read, and of sufficient social standing to have access to the texts, usually in a library associated with a temple or a royal palace. The question arises therefore, *what did the rest of the population know and believe?* And what were they expected to know and believe?

We don't know the answer to that. Maybe very little. In the middle ages of the modern era, it was not uncommon for villagers in remote parts of a kingdom not to know the name of the current king, but society functioned anyway.

The historian Simon Price was one of the first to realise how misleading the filter of two thousand years of Christianity in the west actually was. He stopped talking about belief in connection with ancient religions, and instead talked about 'observance'. We can know about observance, because it is sometimes recorded. What people believed, or were expected to believe, most often isn't.

I think we can assume the ordinary population of Assyria understood very little of the complex structure of Assyrian polytheism, or anything at all about the intellectual arguments which underpinned it. But they could be taught easily about the importance of observances, and where and when these should take place. They would hear something of the most important

gods, and might even have seen them when removed from the temple for a public festival. They would have heard stories about them. But they knew nothing of importance about theology. They didn't need to know anything about that.

The irony here is that the detail of what they would have observed, which would have included festivals throughout the year, marking key points such as the winter solstice, the beginning of spring (the start of the new year), the summer solstice, the autumnal equinox; festivals associated with the gods of generation, and observances associated with the limits of things, and the passing of boundaries between one thing or state and another, was actually closer to the rational core of the religion, than any of the stories and liturgy which informed the higher level of the religion. They could (and did) observe various simple rites, but did not necessarily have any understanding of the logic underlying what they were doing.

An example of observance in faithful ignorance is an incident which is recorded in the *Anabasis* by Xenophon. The Greek army was in the presence of a Persian army, and effectively hunkered down until the Persian army moved on. During this time, a number of readings of omens were taken, none of which were propitious. At the same time, they were doing what any army does, which is to scout out the disposition of their opponents. Eventually the Persians moved on, and the Greek scouts reported this.

But the Greek army did not move. They sacrificed further animals, and the omens remained negative. So they stayed where they were. Military intelligence by itself was not sufficient. After a period of time, the omens changed, and they moved.

I remember a tutorial at university where we talked about what people believed in daily life, and this instance came up. There was a level of disbelief at how the Greeks behaved, and it is fair to say that it doesn't make sense to people in the modern world. But it made sense to those in the ancient world. At some level, even if they didn't understand the theoretical basis which supported the idea of omens: they observed the observances.

Is what the ancients thought about this of importance to us? I think it is, since they were focussed on knowledge, which is one of the themes of *The Sacred History of Being*. And supposedly it is what we are about too. But we don't seem to be focussed on knowledge in the same way. Watts writes that:

> The present phase of human thought and history … almost compels us to face reality with open minds, and you can only know God through an open mind just as you can only see the sky through a clear window. You will not see the sky if you have covered the glass with blue paint.
>
> But "religious" people who resist the scraping of the paint from the glass, who regard the scientific attitude with fear and mistrust, and confuse faith with clinging to certain ideas, are curiously ignorant of laws of the spiritual life which they might find in their own traditional records. A careful study of comparative religion and spiritual philosophy reveals that abandonment of belief, of any clinging to a future life for one's own, and of any attempt to escape from finitude and mortality, is a regular and normal stage in the way of the spirit. Indeed, this is actually such a "first principle" of the spiritual life that it should have been obvious from the beginning, and it seems, after all, surprising that learned theologians should adopt anything but a cooperative attitude towards the critical philosophy of science.

Logic, Sophistry and the Esoteric in Ancient Education

We are inclined to treat ancient argument at face value, except where we do not understand the significance of the argument. Then engagement with the material is difficult to maintain, because what we need to know isn't present. The argument is dependent on an esoteric interpretation long lost to us. Or at least that the consensus view.

Both Plato and Aristotle's writings contain arguments which either don't make clear logical sense within themselves, or in the context of the rest of the work. One translator of Plato's *Philebus* (Robin Waterfield) confessed in his preface that even after translating the work, he didn't know what it was about.

Sometimes the clues to the meaning of arguments are present elsewhere in the canons of both writers, even for the ones which clearly involve an esoteric level of understanding. The whole body of their outputs need to be taken on board in order to grasp the meaning of individual works. This is usually not done with the works of Aristotle. His *Historia Animalium* is read by biologists and specialists in animal taxonomies, but usually they read little else of his work. As if one work is unconnected to the others.

Sometimes arguments are unsatisfactory at a logical level. It would be easy to write these examples off as sloppy instances of argument. But we may be too quick to do this. Both Plato and Aristotle taught students, and we need to explore something of their approaches to the education of their students.

We can begin by considering Aristotle's laws of thought, which are the ancestor of most later systems of non-paradoxical logical modalities. They aren't as sound as they would seem to be, and his approach to the education of his students may have something to do with this.

Aristotle’s laws of thought are as follows:

A thing is itself and not something else. Which is known as the law of identity.

There is also the law of non-contradiction – a thing cannot be a thing other than itself, at least at the same time. Aristotle gives three definitions in his *Metaphysics*: Ontological: "It is impossible that the same thing belong and not belong to the same thing at the same time and in the same respect." (1005b19-20). Psychological: "No one can believe that the same thing can (at the same time) be and not be." (1005b23-24). Logical: "The most certain of all basic principles is that contradictory propositions are not true simultaneously." (1011b13-14)

The third is the law of the excluded middle. Meaning that a thing is either itself, or something else, not something in between. He states it as a principle in the *Metaphysics* book 3, saying that it is necessary in every case to affirm or deny, and that it is impossible that there should be anything between the two parts of a contradiction.

This is not part of Aristotle's manual of logical procedure, known as the *Organon*. The *Organon* codifies how the human understanding should deal with identifying and differentiating aspects of reality, reasoning, deduction, detecting false or misleading conclusions and specious modes of argument (the text on *Sophistical Refutations* is part of the *Organon*). This work is based on the ancient practice of collection and division, of identifying the same, and what is different. We normally think of dialectic as what the Greeks did in the course of philosophical argument, but its original scope was much wider than that. They were engaged in the practice of collection and division in Babylonia and elsewhere in the second millennium B.C.E. Which is why the Babylonians and the Assyrians created lexical lists of objects which had something in common, such the property of whiteness (the purpose of which scholars initially found puzzling, and most still do).

The law of non-contradiction, as stated by Aristotle, isn't actually provable, though he tried to demonstrate it. Many later philosophers have tinkered with the law, but its main use is as a guide to thinking, and it is useful to know, even if it is possible to give instances where it does not hold.

I've said elsewhere that Aristotle practised sophistry. I do not mean that he was a liar or that he was trying to make 'the worse cause appear better' (Plato's accusation against the sophists). But he did create fictions. I used

the conclusion of his *Nicomachean Ethics* as an example, in which he states that the gods cannot move or interact with the world, and that their function is restricted to contemplation. Which must have seemed like a denial of the role of the divine in the world, current at the end of the fourth century B.C.E.

I studied the *Nicomachean Ethics* in some depth as a student, and noticed that a part of his argument is repeated, in slightly different words (in Book 8 I think). It has been observed before that the cramped and compacted wording of Aristotle's treatises is reminiscent of lecture notes taken down in the classroom. And that's what we have here - someone has collated notes from at least two different hands, and added two passages which repeat the same section of one of Aristotle's classes (there are three ethical treatises which are attributed to Aristotle, so this may have been a popular series of classes, perhaps repeated on different occasions, and in slightly different forms).

My point is that Aristotle was a teacher, and was creating lectures which weren't simply to be absorbed whole as the final word on the subject by a great teacher. He was expecting his students to think. Some of the students would ask questions, query points, or perhaps argue against the main pillar of the argument, though most wouldn't.

Both Plato and Aristotle had the concept of an inner and outer knowledge. Plato referred to these grades of knowledge as *ta eso* and *ta exo*. We know that students at Aristotle's Lyceum attended two different sets of classes, one in the morning, and the second set in the afternoon. Exoteric knowledge was taught in the morning, and the esoteric understanding of things was reserved for those who attended in the afternoon.

Esoteric knowledge is by definition obscure in nature, and/or difficult to understand. Which is what the story of the prisoners in the cave in Plato's *Republic* is all about. They see the shadows of reality on the wall before them, but not the reality itself. When they are released with suddenness, their reason is deranged by the experience. Instead they should have been released gradually, being shown details of reality first, without the whole of the shocking truth of reality being given to them all at once.

So both Plato and Aristotle were dealing in what they understood to be esoteric knowledge. In Mesopotamia there was a similar division of the types of knowledge. We are told by the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (Seventh century B.C.E.) that the common run of men are ‘deaf and blind throughout their lives’. Exoteric knowledge of divine things would consist of the names of the gods, their epithets, and stories told of the gods. This superficial knowledge could be imparted by fathers to sons, and could be taught in the schoolroom, as sometimes is said in tablet colophons. The esoteric knowledge was kept secret by the initiates and the priesthood, and tablets relating to the mysteries of the gods would state that they were not to be read by the uninitiated.

Aristotle’s Lyceum can therefore be thought of as a combination of school and college, with the classes in the morning providing a steady flow of students who had shown sufficient intelligence and independence of mind to be suitable for the classes which imparted esoteric knowledge in the afternoon. They could show this intelligence by challenging the sophistical arguments embedded in Aristotle’s lectures (as I’ve said, he attempted to prove some of his arguments, but didn’t always succeed. The students were supposed to spot when what he said was not soundly based).

Aristotle often begins from what people commonly believe – from common opinion. Common opinion as we know is usually wrong. It has been suggested that he attempts in the course of argument to lead the students from what they think they already know, to something closer to what Plato would have called true opinion. In short, to release them gradually from their imprisonment with the shadows of true knowledge. He isn’t always doing that, as the *Nicomachean Ethics* shows. So it is possible that this series of lectures, and perhaps also his Metaphysics, belong to the morning sessions, where the purpose was not to impart true knowledge, but to detect the sharpest and most critical students. For example, from the *Metaphysics*:

> First then this at least is obviously true, that the word 'be' or 'not be' has a definite meaning, so that not everything will be 'so and not so'. Again, if 'man' has one meaning, let this be 'two-footed animal'; by having one meaning I understand this:-if 'man' means

> 'X', then if A is a man 'X' will be what 'being a man' means for him. It makes no difference even if one were to say a word has several meanings, if only they are limited in number; for to each definition there might be assigned a different word. For instance, we might say that 'man' has not one meaning but several, one of which would have one definition, viz. 'two-footed animal', while there might be also several other definitions if only they were limited in number; for a peculiar name might be assigned to each of the definitions. If, however, they were not limited but one were to say that the word has an infinite number of meanings, obviously reasoning would be impossible; for not to have one meaning is to have no meaning, and if words have no meaning our reasoning with one another, and indeed with ourselves, has been annihilated; for it is impossible to think of anything if we do not think of one thing; but if this is possible, one name might be assigned to this thing.
>
> — Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book IV, Part 4

He cannot mean this. All poetry, literature and art collapses at this point, where Aristotle claims that, in order to eliminate ambiguity in thought, there should be a one to one correspondence between words and definitions. This would have made no sense to the Babylonians and to the Assyrians, whose literature is woven all through with wordplay - homonyms, synonyms, ideograms, logograms, phonograms, metaphor, metonomy, and a litany of interchangeable signs and signifiers.

Aristotle's laws of thought provide guidance for understanding what exists in the world of physical existence, but what Plato tells us about is an esoteric doctrine, which explains what is hidden and obscure, and relates to the gods, and what is divine. As one might expect, the rules for the gods are different.

Beyond Mathematics and Geometry

Everything has an inside and an outside. We live in a world in which we mostly react to what is on the outside of things, and readily apparent, rather than what is on the inside, and often invisible to us. What is on the outside is the phenomenon, what is on the inside is the noumenon.

The distinction between what is phenomenal, and what is noumenal, is a major idea in the philosophical outlook of Kant, who pointed out that what things actually are is not only generally unknown to us, but is in many cases actually unknowable.

The argument about this can be quite complex, since not only are there often many simple obstacles to understanding what a thing is, once the observer starts to think in terms of a contrast between a phenomenal representation of what that thing is, and the actual nature of the thing in itself (the noumenon), we become aware of just how little we may know or understand of the relationship between the two. The world is represented to us through the senses, and is interpreted in terms of the categories of understanding which we use to make sense of this information. But how that interpretation relates to what is represented to us in this way is mysterious. Speaking of representation is a good way of reminding ourselves that how something appears, and how it is in itself, is a matter of a conflation of the representation of a thing, and the conventions about what it is, or might be, which exist within the categories of our understanding.

So when we see a tree, we, as a matter of convention, treat the tree and its appearance as what the tree is, because in normal circumstances, there is not likely to be a conflict between our understanding of what is being represented to us by our understanding of the sense data available to us. The appearance fits with the categories of knowledge and understanding which we bring to bear on our experience.

Kant was not the first to observe that there was a distinction between appearance and reality, and between what is understood of a phenomenon by convention, and what the real nature of a thing is, This

was a recurring thread in the development of Greek philosophy. Their understanding of the nature of their world was framed within the context of divine powers and agencies, so the idea that reality was hidden from the human understanding was highly developed among the Greeks and other ancient societies.

A question which is sometimes posed to children to illustrate the idea that the representation of something isn't the same as what it is, is: 'what is the colour of grass?' The answer will usually be returned quickly, and be 'green'. But of course grass isn't green. We see grass because the blades reflect particular wavelengths of light more strongly than others, and absorb some wavelengths. So we don't see what colour grass actually is. In fact we are prompted to ask what we mean by an entity having a property of colour at all. Grass absorbs red transmitted light, and reflects green light, and those are the properties involved in our apprehension of the colour of the grass. We don't know what the colour of grass in itself is, or even if it is an appropriate question, but we can describe the processes involved in how we apprehend it.

The categories of our understanding serve us from our earliest years, but in a simple form. The development of critical intelligence is the consequence of learning that what is presented to the mind and understanding is often more complex than it appears to be. What we need from our understanding at age six is hopelessly inadequate for us at age twenty. We learn (with the aid of education) to reprogramme the categories of our understanding so that we can process the information in a more sophisticated way than we did at six, and are no longer the prisoners of the illusion that the direct presentation of a thing is the thing itself.

This process of separating ourselves from an interpretation of the world in terms of simple apprehension is driven initially by the practical necessities of our existence. But this process does not need to stop there. Intelligence consists in being able to adjust the categories of our understanding so that we do not mistake one thing for another. It is a mental development which might have no end. This is essentially how Kant understood human intellectual development, which he framed (in his *Prolegomena*) in terms of a general theory of *a priori* concepts, not based on empirical sense data,

or even a mathematical or geometric understanding of anything in the world. These *a priori* concepts can have a relationship with sense data and form in the phenomenal world, but they are not derived from these objects and constructs, and can be understood only as concepts entirely stripped of everything which would give them phenomenal or mathematical reality.

What is proposed in the *Prolegomena* is that real intelligence and understanding is what is shown to the mind by the mind alone, and that these concepts make sense only as purely mental constructs, manipulated and understood by the mind.

So Kant was talking about understanding what is beyond all representation, except in terms of mental abstractions, shorn of scalar and mathematical properties. They are entirely *a priori* abstractions. The focus of Kant's metaphysics therefore is the noumenal reality behind all phenomenal appearance. This form of metaphysics he regarded as the basis of a scientific understanding of reality, and that all approaches to understanding the world through how it presents itself to us are faulty, and will not tell us what we may wish to know about what lies behind appearance.

Evading the Infinite

This is a critical commentary on Adrian Moore's A *History of the Infinite*, broadcast in ten episodes by the BBC (on Radio 4) across two weeks in late September/early October 2016. The first episode was broadcast on the 19th September. Episodes are discussed in order of broadcast. I was in conversation with Adrian Moore from halfway through the series, and this conversation continued into early 2018. Moore wrote a book on the philosophical and mathematical aspects of the infinite in 1990, which was a volume in the series 'Problems of Philosophy'. This radio series gave its arguments much more exposure than they ever had before.

I have spent many years studying Greek philosophy, and as a result I found both Moore's arguments and his narrative concerning the idea of the infinite to be oddly structured. There is a gaping hole at the start, since Plato is scarcely mentioned, and none of his arguments appear in the narrative (sometimes voiced in the dialogues by his master Socrates). He does discuss the ideas of Pythagoras, but in such a way that it is hard to recognise him, and the many parallels which exist in Plato's writing. As a result, this history of the infinite is not a complete history, tracing the discussion of the idea from the earliest period possible, but a history with a strong *point of view*, which begins at a point which is convenient for the arguments which follow (Moore's book on the infinite has a much broader compass).

Part of my purpose here is to outline Plato's engagement with the idea of the infinite, and to place it before Moore's chosen point of departure. Understanding what Plato said concerning the unlimited and unbounded necessarily changes the interpretation of Aristotle's views and arguments, with which Moore begins. Simply writing Plato out of the narrative not only creates something of a fictitious narrative, but also creates difficulties that otherwise would not exist.

Oddly for an account of man's engagement with the infinite, the first of the series of programmes is titled 'Horror of the Infinite'. Moore quotes the mathematician David Hilbert:

> The infinite has always stirred the emotions of mankind more deeply than any other question; the infinite has stimulated and fertilized reason as few other ideas have; but also the infinite, more than other notion, is in need of clarification.

Moore accepts Hilbert's characterisation of the idea of the infinite. He begins by saying that

> ever since people have been able to reflect, they've been captivated and puzzled by the infinite, in its many varied guises; by the endlessness of space and time; by the thought that between any two points in space, however close, there is always another; by the fact that numbers go on forever; and by the idea of an all-knowing, all powerful god. People have been by turns attracted, fascinated, perplexed, and disturbed, by these various different forms of infinity.

Indeed yes. But Moore's account appears to start at 'disturbed', rather than 'attracted'.

Is God the Infinite, and Reality itself? Moore does not much concern himself with this question in this sequence of programmes, at least not in the terms in which the Greeks understood the question. The following is an extract from *The Sacred History of Being* (2015):

> The Greeks did not contemplate the idea that the 'existence' of God, or the supremely perfect Being, was subject to proof. This would have been anathema to them, for the reason that they understood the very concept of the divine is inevitably beyond the capacity of the human mind to understand, or to frame. It is also beyond space and time. It is possible to say something about the divine, but that is all. Saying that the supreme perfect Being has a property 'perfection' is fine, but the meaning of this perfection is strictly limited in its human understandability. To attribute the property of secular 'existence' to this Being would have been regarded as absurd.
>
> Yet it would be granted that one could argue that, without the property of existence, the perfection, or the completeness of God,

was compromised. But for it to be in the world of change and corruption would also be understood as compromising the perfection of the supreme Being. At least in terms of public discussion. Thus the Greek view of reality and the Divine was that there was a paradox at the root of reality and the gods, and that *it was not possible to define the nature of the Divine without exposing that definitio*n. The enlightened enquirer into the nature of the divine therefore is spared further pointless argument about the nature and the very existence of God. Both are conceivably true. But the true nature of the Divine, being a paradox, rises beyond our capacity to argue about that nature. It remains a matter of conjecture.

Our human experience tells us we live in a world in which change is possible, and inevitable. The definition of the Divine on the other hand, tells us, the divine reality beyond this world of appearances is a place of eternal invariance. It suggests that at the apex of reality, it is not possible for the divine to act in any way, or to participate in the world of change. Again there is a difficulty if we hold that the greatest and most perfect Being can do nothing without contravening its essential nature. A whole range of properties would clearly be missing from the divine nature.

It would seem that the Greek solution to this problem was to argue, as Plato and the neoplatonists did, that the world of reality was in fact invariable, as the theory requires. And it did not at any time change. But a copy was made. As a copy it was less than perfect, and this imperfection created the possibility of change, action, and corruption. This copy is eternally partnered by the original, which stands behind it, unchanging and unchanged by anything which happens in the copy of the original divine model. As a copy it is the same, but as a copy it is different.

This however, is a solution which Plato labelled as a likelihood. Which is code for: ‘this is not the answer to the problem’.

One of the properties of the supremely perfect Being would be that he was one and not two. In the creation of a copy, the invariability of the divine has been breached, and the divine is now two, not one. Two, not one, would seem to be a fatal objection. Firstly the copy is a representation of the original, and not the original itself. Secondly, the copy is imperfect, and through the act of representation, it has become different. The original continues complete in its original nature, with its original properties and characteristics. Plato hints at territory beyond this contradiction, but does not venture into it overtly.

This is the key mystery of ancient thought. To understand the full significance of this problem, and its implications for ancient models of reality, we need to look closely, as they would, at what a copy of Being actually means. *There can be no copy*, at least not in an objective sense. And if there is no objective copy, then the world which moves and which has existence, *must be a subjective view of Being*.

Apart from anything else, if the world is a wholly subjective experience, occurring (if we dare to use that word) within Being itself, then the change and motion which is apparent to us, and which contradistinguishes the world of existence from Being, which is itself and only itself, must be illusory. The illusion may be convincing, but ultimately it remains as an illusion, however persuasive it is to us, that there is an objective reality which is subject to change and movement.

This is the correct answer to the problem. Our experience in the world is of finite things, which are finite representations of things which are infinite. But this world is also infinite, and at the same time. It is therefore a matter of apprehension, understanding, and will, if man is to engage with infinity, and reality itself.

Hence Plato's discussion of the ascent to The Good via the Forms, to that infinite place where all knowledge is to be had, and to descend again with divine knowledge, again entirely via the Forms, to the world of sensibles. What he is actually talking about

is a formal process and discipline by which the finite human mind can engage with infinity.

Pythagoras was much closer to Plato in terms of doctrine than scholars normally allow. I can demonstrate this by quoting the Neoplatonist Porphyry who wrote about Pythagoras many centuries after his lifetime. Porphyry's account tells us that:

> He cultivated philosophy, the scope of which is to free the mind implanted within us from the impediments and fetters within which it is confined; without whose freedom none can learn anything sound or true, or perceive the unsoundedness in the operation of sense. Pythagoras thought that mind alone sees and hears, while all the rest are blind and deaf. The purified mind should be applied to the discovery of beneficial things, which can be effected by, certain artificial ways, which by degrees induce it to the contemplation of eternal and incorporeal things, which never vary. This orderliness of perception should begin from consideration of the most minute things, lest by any change the mind should be jarred and withdraw itself, through the failure of continuousness in its subject-matter.

That is exactly the doctrine of the ascent and descent via the Forms which is described by Plato. The definition of transcendent reality in Plato (articulated by Socrates) is that it is a place beyond shape, form, size, etc., and occupies no place on earth. It is however the place where knowledge has its reality (the 'eternal and incorporeal things' mentioned by Pythagoras). Connection with transcendent reality is possible by the likenesses to the transcendent which have existence on earth, such as things which are complete and whole, which therefore participate in the completeness and wholeness of the transcendent reality. Completeness and wholeness require (in the world of the mundane) delineation and limits, and so the limits and the extremes of things are also things which participate in transcendent reality.

> The principle of ascent to the 'eternal and incorporeal things' is entirely a mental process, which does not involve any of the senses. It proceeds via chains of similitudes, both up and down, as a sequence of orderly perceptions. The goal is a form of communion with that which never varies, and which is always one and unchanging, as Plato tells us in the *Sophist*. The return from the communion with the Good delivers beneficial things, because the Good is the source of all knowledge.
>
> What is transmitted to us via the writings of the Platonists, is something of the basis of both their understanding of what the Divine actually is (the Infinite, the Limitless, and Reality itself), and how man may have commerce with the Divine, through sacred rather than profane practices, in a world which has a double nature, and in which man has a choice.

Looked at in this way, rather than being a history of infinity, Moore's argument is about the idea of the infinite from the point of view of finitude. This is the way Aristotle chose to deal with the infinite, by dividing the concept into the actual infinite, and a potential infinite, and dealing with the latter. Moore has said elsewhere that the way he treats the infinite is generally in terms of an Aristotelian Finitism.

We might pause here and consider what the implications might be of the identification of the Infinite and the Divine, which seems to be implicit in the views of a number of ancient philosophers. If they did so identify these concepts, then *much of Greek religious thought and practice was based on a philosophical understanding of the infinite*. In which case, Moore's history is a history of what happens when the actual importance of the infinite in the life of man is forgotten, misunderstood, and eventually no longer noticed for what it is. Much of Moore's argument is shaped by his Aristotelian Finitism.

In the first programme, Moore argues that the Pythagoreans thought finite things were good, and that infinite things were bad (this information comes to us via Aristotle), and that they thought they had evidence that the finite had some kind of control over what was infinite. And that the usefulness of rational numbers showed that this was the case. This is

clearly a garbling of Pythagorean thought from a distant age, if Pythagoras thought that ascent to eternal and incorporeal things was important, as I've suggested. There is also discussion of musical ratios, and the Pythagorean discovery that different string lengths with simple ratios are more consonant to the ears than those which involve large values. Their 'discovery' of irrational numbers, which can be found using the theorem of Pythagoras, is said to have filled the Pythagoreans with horror, and the story of one of their number being drowned at sea after revealing their existence, is referenced. Rather than revealing their horror of irrational numbers, this is a story which points to their interest in whole numbers. The idea that they once had no idea about the existence of irrational numbers is absurd.

The programme moves on to consider whether other ancient Greeks had the same resistance to the infinite. The views of Anaxagoras on infinite divisibility are discussed. Anaxagoras was relatively comfortable about these ideas. Zeno's paradoxes in connection with infinite divisibility are also discussed, including his paradox of travelling by an infinite number of half distances, which seems to imply that movement is impossible. The similar paradox of Achilles and the Tortoise is also referenced. Observation and reflection thus seem to contradict each other. Zeno distrusted observation to the point that he believed that movement was impossible. Parmenides was Zeno's teacher, and taught the universe to be a simple unity. So, only the appearance of motion is possible. Otherwise the universe would have to have infinite complexity. Moore winds up the episode by suggesting that because of these paradoxes, and the existence of irrational numbers, that there is some truth in the suggestion that the Greeks had a horror of the infinite.

Looking at the content of this episode in the light of the added preamble about ideas of the infinite held by Plato and Pythagoras, we can see that something old and valuable is contained in the writings of some earlier philosophers, transformed into more or less secularised accounts of the arguments the Greeks used to illustrate the paradoxical nature of the infinite aspects of the world, as they manifest in the world of the finite.

We get many clues about the Greek understanding of the infinite and the unlimited from a number of Plato's dialogues, including *The Timaeus*, *The Sophist*, *The Republic*, *The Theaetetus*, *The Laws*, and *The Parmenides*. In skipping Plato, the first reference to Parmenides and his notion of the universe as simply one and one alone, is as an introduction in the first episode to his pupil Zeno of Elea, and his response to paradox. There is no discussion of Plato's demolition of Parmenides arguments, no discussion of the Platonic forms, no discussion of the relationship of the forms to the form of the Good, which is another way of talking about what is infinite, and no discussion of what amounts to a different logical modality in the pages of Plato (where he discusses things passing into one another by means of their similitude), which is a way of understanding the relationship of finite things to the infinite.

Essentially Aristotle's rapprochement, which Moore characterises as an attempt to make the concept of the infinite more palatable to the Greeks, involved dividing the idea of the infinite into two. As already mentioned, one of these was the potential infinite, and the second was the actual infinite. As outlined in the first episode, Zeno's paradoxes depended on the idea of an infinite divisibility, which seemed to make the idea of any kind of movement impossible, since that would require a universe of infinite complexity. Zeno therefore regarded all forms of movement as illusion. Since in order to travel a certain distance, you would have to travel half the distance to your destination, and then half of the distance remaining, and then half of that, and half of what still remained, and so on. Which would result in an infinite number of steps. Which would be impossible.

Aristotle's response was that though the various stages of the journey could be understood in such a way, the stages were not marked, and did not have to be considered in making a journey. The idea of limit is however a crucial point. What Aristotle was saying is that there are two ways of looking at the idea of what a limit is. Essentially there is limitation which is defined by what a thing is, and there is limitation which is not. In the first case the limit of a thing cannot be transcended without the nature of that thing turning into something else.

The essence of this argument is that there are forms of limit which can be ignored. One of which is the actual infinite: instead we should deal with the potential infinite. The actual infinite, by its nature, is always there. But we cannot deal with it. The potential infinite we can work with, since it is not always there, and spread infinitely through reality. So we can count numbers without ever arriving at infinity, or ever being in danger of arriving there. Moore mentioned that this conception of infinity more or less became an orthodoxy after Aristotle, though not everyone accepted that his argument against actual infinity was solid. Which is something of an understatement. Aristotle's distinction between the potential infinite and the actual infinite is between what is, in practical terms, something we can treat as finite, and what is actually infinite.

It might seem surprising that Moore's first port of call in part three is the philosopher Plotinus, who was writing in the third century C.E., some five centuries after Aristotle. The reason that he has jumped to Plotinus is because he argues that Plotinus claimed not only that the divine was infinite, but that the divine *was* the infinite. Thus conflating the ideas of divinity and infinity in a way that – he says – no one had done before. Or, to be more precise, he declared the identity of the divine and the infinite in a way no-one had done before.

Well no. As I've argued at the beginning of this essay, Plato's principal interest was in a transcendent reality, which it would be hard to distinguish from the infinite, except in hair-splitting terms. He refers to the necessity of 'looking to the one thing', and that the 'one thing' is something which is found nowhere on earth. In one of his dialogues, he has Socrates describe that transcendent realm as something which possesses 'no form, shape or colour.' It is clearly without definition and limitation, with no finite properties and attributes, which means it is unlimited, and infinite. It is also the ultimate source of all knowledge. So it also seems to possess the properties and attributes which are associated with the divine. Plotinus' supposed innovation is therefore no such thing. Anaximander's understanding of the 'apeiron' (the unlimited) as the cause of all things is just such an equation of the divine with the infinite, which means the idea was around in the sixth century B.C.E.

Moore tells us that Plotinus' idea that the divine was infinity itself was taken up by Thomas Aquinas, Aquinas was schooled in Aristotle (there was a renaissance in the study of Aristotle at this time, which was not mentioned), and he was aware of the distinction which Aristotle had made between a potential infinite, and the actual infinite. He also became an authority in the Catholic Church, and wanted to incorporate the philosophy of Aristotle into Christian thought, but with an emphasis on the idea that the divine had reality in the world in terms of a potential infinite, rather than as actual infinity. Aquinas essentially divided infinity into a mathematical conception, and a metaphysical or theological conception.

Aquinas' ideas went on to dominate later Christian thought, but not everyone agreed with what became the doctrinal position. Much later again (Moore's argument makes large temporal jumps), the arrest of the scholar Giordano Bruno in the late sixteenth century, showed how dangerous the idea of the Infinite could be. He was imprisoned and tortured by the Inquisition for having argued that the universe was infinite, and that there existed an infinite number of worlds. He was burned at the stake in 1600. Moore suggests that this marked the end of the renaissance. Galileo Galilei was lucky the same thing did not happen to him. His interest in the number of numbers in existence was discussed in this episode, and these and the numbers of their squares and roots, seemed to him to be infinite. This represented the birth of a whole new set of paradoxes with later repercussions in mathematics.

The fourth programme discusses the views of Rene Descartes in the sixteenth century, and also the views of philosophers from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. I haven't added up the number of centuries of thought which have not been discussed at all, but so far argument has been drawn from the sixth century B.C.E. (Pythagoras) fourth century B.C.E. (Aristotle, Zeno), the third century C.E. (Plotinus), the 13th century C.E. (Aquinas), and the 16th century C.E. (Bruno). Which is a journey of around twenty centuries.

It isn't that there is nothing to say about the idea of infinity during those long centuries, but that where Moore is going determined his selection of evidence and argument. He wants to talk mainly about the role and history

of infinity in mathematics and in physics, and the fascinating paradoxes and problems which later investigation has thrown up. And a little about religious faith and the infinite. The first episodes are therefore a necessary introduction to set the scene.

As he puts it in the text introduction to this episode, 'we have arrived at a time where people think about these things as we now do.' A telling statement, which hints at the richness and strangeness of the unexplored territory between the sixth century B.C.E. and the sixteenth century C.E., and that most of it is best skipped over as quickly as possible. It also lets us know that he has a normative view of human thought, and that what he thinks is rational and reasonable is mostly to be found in modern times. His is the Enlightenment agenda, which he mentions during this episode.

Descartes famous 'Cogito Ergo Sum' ('I think therefore I am') is mentioned in the context of Descartes massive reduction of all the ideas and beliefs which he could accept unequivocally as true. He engaged in this reduction in order not to rely on tradition and authority, but on the intellectual resources available to the finite human mind. The question of whether the infinite can be grasped at all by the human mind is discussed, since we cannot see it or touch it. It is hard for us to know it, because it is the infinite. Descartes is quoted as saying that you cannot put your arms around a mountain as you can around a tree. So our knowledge of the infinite is necessarily less intimate than our knowledge of finite things.

In the next part, the relationship between Descartes confidence in his own existence and capacity to think (expressed in the 'cogito') and his understanding of the infinite nature of God, is less than clear. It is true that Descartes suggested that he might have an idea of an infinitely perfect, infinitely powerful God because God put that idea into his mind. That might be the case. Alternatively, it may be that you as a finite being do not have to have an intimate acquaintance with the infinite in order to understand what you are talking about.

Moore does not use the expression which Descartes employed to explain why it was not necessary to have intimate knowledge of something in order to have a useful and intelligible idea of what it is. He used 'clear and distinct' idea to indicate when he had such a useful and intelligible notion

of what he was talking about. Later, Bertrand Russell would reformulate the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description (in his *Problems of Philosophy*). So, by 'clear and distinct ideas' about God Descartes is relying on a description of what is, which means that he could be sure what he meant, and that his idea of God was a rational idea.

In fact, Descartes idea of his own finite reality was *dependent on his certainty of the reality of an infinite God*. If he could conceive of such a God clearly and distinctly, then it was likely that such a God was real.

Moore skips on to the second half of the eighteenth century, mentioning Berkeley ('there is no such thing as the 10,000 part of an inch' is all that is said), and Hume also, in connection with the indivisibility of reality (the disappearing inkspot when seen from sufficient distance, which is a matter of perception and experience rather than indivisibility *per se*). Berkeley was an idealist philosopher, who held that the only reason the world is perceptible is because it is held in the mind of God. He also denied materiality, at least as a metaphysical concept.

Finally Moore discusses a narrow aspect of Kant's understanding of the idea of infinity. This final part of the episode represents a highly misleading understanding of Kant.

Moore argues that Kant agreed with Descartes that we have a clear idea of the infinite (the nearest he gets to the Cartesian formulation 'things which are clear and distinct'). But that our idea is limited to what we can experience and perhaps what we can invest faith in. Really? I don't think it is. Did Kant say that knowledge is confined to the five senses? And if we don't understand knowledge this way, we leave solid ground and end up in metaphysics? That is what seems to be suggested at this point in the series.

One of Kant's principal interests was metaphysics, and how we apprehend things and have knowledge of them. Hume's empiricism was one of the things which impelled Kant to write some of his most important works (*The Critique of Pure Reason*, and *The Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics which may Present itself as a Science).* It isn't the case that Kant thought

our ideas are limited to what we can experience in terms of the senses, but instead what is intelligible to us is interpreted through the categories of our understanding. He sought to understand shape and form without these things being associated with form possessing scalar values and spatial angles, which are matters of experience. In that he was very close indeed to Plato's understanding of the Platonic forms.

Kant, a figure so important to the concept of reason, is quoted as saying that 'I go beyond knowledge to make room for faith'. It is true that Kant had the idea that rational thought and reason did not have to exclude a life of faith. It had space in which to exist. But it does not mean that Kant thought that faith was important to the life of reason. For Kant, like Pythagoras and Plato, knowledge is not gained through knowledge of sensible things, but is acquired by the contemplation of things which have a transcendent reality. This isn't something which everyone can do, or will ever be able to do. Since there is an equation between the Divine and the Infinite, what Kant is doing is leaving space for some sort of understanding of the Divine for those who will never have a genuine understanding of transcendental reality and the Infinite. He is not arguing that faith creates a functional connection with the Infinite.

Karl Lōwith wrote that, in his book *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant had interpreted

> the whole history of Christianity as a gradual advance from a religion of revelation to a religion of reason…. It is the most advanced expression of the Christian faith for the very reason that it eliminates the irrational presupposition of faith and grace.

Moore then turns to Kant's conception of the moral law. Aspects of the life of the mind which put us in contact with the infinite are about our reason, our rationality. Our reason enables us to grasp the moral law, which gives us infinite dignity (since we are rational beings). He says that "the moral law is what ought to direct us in all we do, with infinite respect granted to fellow rational beings".

Which explains little. The origin of Kant's moral law may be the idea that the life of reason, and rationality itself (as he defined it) is about

connecting with the infinite. If man is truly rational, then he is connected with the Infinite (the ancient concept of the soul, as discussed by Plato, is related to this idea). But we need to accept Kant's understanding of what reason is, and not distort it by saying knowledge is obtained through the five senses. Through this distortion, what Moore is left with is the Calvinist notion of a 'sensus divinitatis' (sense of divinity). Which is a poor substitute for the kind of engagement with divinity which was understood to be possible in the ancient world. Such engagement was not achieved through knowledge of the world of the five senses or space and time.

In the episode which follows, the subject is the nature and development of the calculus. It begins with the observation that to divide zero by zero, or zero into anything at all, makes no sense. If you know anything about the calculus, it is clear what is being talked about in this episode, but the way it is discussed is lacking in the kind of precise description you might expect.

A train is used as an illustration. Travelling a distance of sixty miles over an hour means that the train had an average speed of sixty miles an hour. However, the train might have been travelling at a much higher speed for half of the journey, and have been delayed by signal failure during the second half of the journey. So if you measure the distance travelled and the speed at a particular point in the journey, the result may be misleading. If the time period measured is very short, say close to zero, and the distance travelled is close to zero, then you will know nothing useful about how fast the train is going, and how long it will take to complete its journey.

Calculus enables the accurate measure of quantities which are subject to change (which is why the inventor of the calculus as we know it today, Isaac Newton, referred to it as 'Fluxions'). The episode makes clear how important the development of the mathematics of change has been ever since, and that much of the modern world depends on the use of calculus. The term 'integration' makes no appearance in this episode.

Much of the rest of the programme discusses the invention of calculus, and the bitter dispute which arose between Isaac Newton and the philosopher Leibniz, who developed a similar approach to the mathematics of change quite independently. Newton appears to have begun to develop the

mathematics for ‘fluxions’ early on – perhaps as early as the 1660s. The chronology is not clearly established, but Leibniz may have developed his version some ten years later.

Newton did not publish any information about the mathematics involved in the calculus until many years later, preferring to share a few details with his friends and colleagues. Newton was aware of Leibniz and his work, not least because he too was a member of the Royal Society. Eventually he wrote to Leibniz with some limited details of the calculus (Moore suggests that Leibniz could not have understood these details since they were in code). Newton became aware that Leibniz had developed similar mathematics to deal with change, and a long dispute ensued, mostly conducted via intermediaries. Leibniz was often travelling, and so correspondence sometimes took months to reach him. Newton launched attacks on the integrity of Leibniz, accusing him of plagiarizing his ideas. Leibniz was bemused by his attacks and the force with which they were made. But Newton had decided that Leibniz was his enemy, and that was that.

Eventually it was proposed that a report be prepared by the Royal Society to establish who had the prior claim to the invention of calculus. This sounds fair, except that the President of the Royal Society wrote the report, and the President was Isaac Newton. As Moore says, ‘not Newton’s finest hour’.

The philosopher George Berkeley makes another more substantial appearance in this episode, since he wrote a criticism of what he called ‘the analysts’ (*The Analyst: a Discourse addressed to an Infidel Mathematician* (1734)). His criticism was based on the general lack of rigour with which calculus was often used at the time, and argued that scholars who attacked religious and theological arguments for lack of rigour were being similarly careless. The criticism revolves around the limitations of the technique already mentioned, when the quantities and measures chosen are too small to produce intelligible results.

The most famous quotation from this book describes infinitesimals as ‘the ghosts of departed quantities’. The book seems to have been aimed particularly at the mathematician Edmund Halley, who is reported to have

described the doctrines of Christianity as 'incomprehensible', and the religion itself as an 'imposture'. Moore references the fact that the technique of the calculus lacked technical rigour until the early nineteenth century, until the idea of the limit was introduced (in fact Cauchy, and later Riemann and Weierstrass redefined both the derivative and the integral using a rigorous definition of the concept of limit. But that is another story).

Moore concludes the episode by saying that:

> precisely what such precision and rigour show, is that the calculus can be framed without any reference to infinitely small quantities. There is certainly no need to divide zero by zero. What then remains is a branch of mathematics, which is regarded by many, in its beauty, depth and power, as one of the greatest ever monuments to mathematical excellence.

The sixth episode is concerned with the infinitely big, considered not in terms of physical size, but in the context of mathematics. It focuses on the work of the German mathematician, Georg Cantor, who devised a way of distinguishing between different infinite sizes, and of calculating with infinite numbers. Cantor was the first to do such a thing. One of the most interesting developments in modern mathematics, and as Moore says, his work was 'utterly revolutionary.'

Everyone knows there is no such thing as the biggest number. No matter how far you travel along a sequence of numbers, you can always count further. Even Aristotle, who Moore suggested in an earlier episode was an arch-sceptic about the infinitely big, accepted the reality of the infinite only in terms of processes and sequences which were destined to go on for ever.

This might be a little tendentious, since as Moore has already pointed out in the episode 'Aristotle's Rapprochment', he divided the concept of the infinite into two things: the actual infinite, and a potential infinite. The world of numbers and calculation exists in the context of the potential infinite, in which change happens in space and time. The actual infinite, for the purposes of mathematics, is simply ignored, since it is (apparently) not

possible to work with it. I make this point since there is much about Aristotle's wider philosophical work which points to a strong concern with the actual infinite. He isn't sceptical about the reality of the infinite.

Aristotle's view prevailed for over two thousand years, and during that period there was hostility to the idea that the infinite itself could be the subject of mathematical study in its own right. This orthodoxy was not challenged until the late nineteenth century, when Cantor presented a systematic, rigorous, formal theory of the infinite. Moore is interested in what drove him, and at what cost.

Cantor had a very hard time in trying to have his ideas accepted by the mathematical community, partly because of the perception that there was a religious component to his work. Henri Poincaré said of his work that: 'it was a disease, and there would be a cure.' His teacher Leopold Kronecker, who might have been expected to support his pupil, was hostile to his work, and made it difficult for him to publish. Kronecker said 'God made the integers, all the rest is the work of man'. Cantor suffered several nervous breakdowns, possibly because of the sheer perplexity of his work, and died in an asylum.

Moore now considers set theory. How do you count without actually counting, and know if a set or collection is the same size as another? You can assemble pairs of things, such as male and female, cats, dogs, etc. If they are paired, and there are no extra males, females, cats or dogs left over, then you know that they are the same size without counting the individuals in the sets.

Does this apply to the infinite? Cantor asked why not? But here things get a little weird. The set of what Moore refers to as 'the counting numbers' (positive integers) appears to be the same size as the set of the even numbers. Even though the first set includes all the numbers in the set of even numbers, plus all the odd numbers. If we want to show the number of counting numbers is the same as the number of even numbers, we can do this fairly easily by pairing the counting numbers with the even numbers which result from doubling them. There will be nothing left over, so we can say that these two sets are the same size as each other. Moore says that it is tempting to say that comparisons of size just don't make

sense in the infinite case. But Cantor accepted that they were the same size, despite the fact that the first set contained everything in the second set, plus more besides.

Can we use this technique to show that all infinite sets are the same size, which might not be a counter-intuitive conclusion? In fact, some infinite sets are bigger than others, as Cantor discovered. Even if you start with an infinite set, it will always have more subsets than it does have members. You cannot pair numbers with the subsets: there will always be a subset left over. So there are different infinite sizes. Moore does not draw the conclusion that it is the unbounded nature of the infinite which makes the differently sized infinities true. What is infinite contains all things which are possible. It is not just something which is extremely large.

Cantor's work polarized opinion in his lifetime, and it has continued to polarize opinion ever since. The mathematician David Hilbert famously said 'No one shall be able to drive us from the paradise which Cantor has created for us'. To which Wittgenstein responded: 'I wouldn't dream of trying to drive anyone from this paradise: I would do something quite different – I would try to show you that it is not a paradise, so that you leave of your own accord'

Moore concludes with a question: "Is Cantor's work of any significance outside mathematics? Some would say that it is not. It certainly made its mark by creating as many problems as it solved."

It can however be argued that many difficult questions are difficult for us as the result of an important concept dropping out of western philosophy, which is the concept of the plenum. This concept is not discussed by Moore in this series of programmes. The idea of the plenum is that reality itself is undifferentiated possibility, something which does not exist in time and space, but contains every possible aspect of time and space, and everything which might be contained in it as potential, as something which might be generated within physical reality. With the idea of such a transcendent reality, almost anything which can be imagined to exist, can have existence. But such things will inevitably point back to the nature of the initial plenum in some way, and be full of puzzles and paradoxes. In rejecting this view of infinity, and treating it as if it had no bearing on

sensible reality, Aristotle and those who followed afterwards, effectively closed off the possibility of understanding why such paradoxes exist in the physical universe.

In the seventh episode there is a brief introductory recap, reminding us that Georg Cantor created a formal theory of the infinite in the late nineteenth century. The impact of his work on mathematics was large, and led to a period of unprecedented crisis and uncertainty. Subjecting the infinite to formal scrutiny, led to mathematicians confronting puzzles at the heart of their discipline. These puzzles indicate some basic limits to human knowledge.

Moore invites us to consider the issue of sets of sets. How can there be more sets of sets, than there are sets? He suggests at this point that our heads may begin to reel. But why shouldn't we have, say the set of sets which have seven members? Enter Bertrand Russell, who, in trying to come to terms with some of these issues, arrived at what is known as Russell's Paradox. He argued that once we have accepted that there are sets of sets, we can acknowledge sets which belong to themselves, and those which don't. A set of apples is not a member of itself, for example, since it is not an apple.

The paradox arises in connection with the set of all sets which are not members of themselves. On the face of it, there should be such a set, but there is not. For the same reason that there cannot be a nun in a convent who prays for all those nuns in that convent who do not pray for themselves. This is a matter of logical rules. She is going to pray for herself, only if she does not pray for herself, which is impossible. Russell's paradox seemed to indicate a crisis at the heart of mathematics, where sets play a pivotal role.

Russell communicated his paradox to the German mathematician Gottlob Frege, which is a well-rehearsed incident in the history of philosophy and mathematics. Frege had been trying to put these mathematical issues on a sound footing in a three-volume work, which was two thirds completed. Russell's paradox came like a bolt from the blue. Frege replied saying he was 'thunderstruck', since the paradox undermined his attempt to give a

sure foundation to arithmetic, while he was engaged in writing and publishing his life's work. Frege died embittered.

Returning to Cantor, Moore discusses his work with the problem of the 'counting numbers', (1,2,3,4, etc), which constitutes a smaller group than the group of possible sets of the counting numbers. The question arose of how much smaller the first group was. Cantor's hypothesis was that it was just one size smaller, and that there were no sets of intermediate size. But he was unable to confirm that this was the case, or to refute the idea. So he was in a state of uncertainty for a long time, and this exascerbated his lifelong problem with depression. This question was listed by David Hilbert as one of the 23 most important questions in mathematics to be addressed in the ensuing century.

The matter is not settled, even now. Is this the result of mathematicians not being assiduous enough? Moore says that it has been shown that it is impossible, using all of the tools available to mathematicians, to resolve the issue. It looks as though we are stuck with an unanswerable question. Perhaps not completely unanswerable, but it is with the toolkit of mathematical principles which are currently available. No new principle has been discovered in the decades since, so it looks as though we have stumbled on an inherent limitation on mathematical knowledge.

The logician Kurt Gōdel showed that this limitation was in a sense unavoidable, in that, with a limited set of mathematical principles, there will always be truths which lie beyond their reach.

So there are many questions about the foundations of mathematics, and their security, or insecurity. Russell's paradox of the set of all sets which don't contain themselves, had revealed an inconsistency in the principles mathematician's had been working with up to then. David Hilbert had said "how do we know there isn't another inconsistency elsewhere in mathematics generating the problem?" He devised a programme to map mathematics with a limited but very precise set of principles, in order to discover if this was the case. Gōdel's work however, made it unlikely that this programme would be a success. Is there a crisis in modern mathematics? It was suggested that modified versions of the Hilbert programme have proved that there are no other inconsistencies in basic

mathematical principles. And that consequently the rest of mathematics is essentially reliable and consistent. Moore concludes that mathematical work on the infinite has left us acutely aware of what we do not know, and indeed what we cannot know.

The eighth episode opens with a discussion of the Andromeda Galaxy, which is the furthest object in the universe which can be seen with the naked eye. Its light takes two million years to reach us. Yet it is a close neighbour to our own galaxy. The distance is mind-numbing, but it isn't infinite. The central question of this programme is 'where does the concept of infinity fit in with our attempts to understand physical reality?'

Looking up at the night sky is evocative of the infinite for many of us because of the enormous distances involved, but how appropriate is this? Is the number of stars infinite? Is space infinite? Is anything in nature infinite? The Greeks contemplated these ideas. Moore quotes Archytas of Tarentum (4^{th} century B.C.E.) on this question:

> If I am at the extremity of the heaven of the fixed stars, can I stretch outwards my hand or staff? It is absurd to suppose that I could not; and if I can, what is outside must be either body or space. We may then in the same way get to the outside of that again, and so on; and if there is always a new place to which the staff may be held out, this clearly involves extension without limit.

Aristotle, who wrote a little later, resisted Archytas' argument, and said that although it is true that the universe can't be bounded by anything outside it, nevertheless, it is only spatially finite. This may be difficult for us to grasp, but it has become a staple of contemporary cosmology. Moore asks, how do we arbitrate between the views of Archytas and Aristotle? Moore then quotes the seventeenth century philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who didn't think there was anything to arbitrate on, since neither view (infinite or finite) is based on anything which presents itself to the mind. So the question (for Hobbes) is meaningless.

The mathematician John Barrow (Cambridge) distinguishes between speculations about the universe as a whole, and our piece of it, the part

which is visible, about which we can have a scientific understanding. So though the universe is potentially infinite in size, we can only see a part of it, which may not be infinite. If someone says that it is infinite, that is a purely philosophical speculation, and cannot be demonstrated. Moore then asks: If we confine ourselves to the part which is visible to us, can we ask if that part of the universe is infinite or finite?

Isaac Newton though that the matter in the universe had to be infinite, otherwise the cosmos would collapse in on itself. The modern consensus, Moore suggests, is that the amount of matter in the universe is finite. And that indeed, space itself is finite. Even if unbounded, as Aristotle thought. This is an idea which is difficult to grasp – how can the universe be both finite and unbounded?

It might be possible for the universe to be both finite and unbounded. The example is the surface of the earth. Whichever direction you travel, you will always arrive back at the same place (assuming the oceans are not a barrier of course). There is no limit to the distance you can travel, but the surface of the earth is finite, and not infinite. Space itself may be like this, so that there is no limit to the distance you can travel, but that its extent is finite.

If space were curved like the surface of the earth, how would that manifest itself? It is possible to distinguish between the properties of triangles on a flat Euclidean surface, and their properties in a curved space. You can tell the difference between these surfaces, because the angles add up differently. It appears the evidence that we have suggests space itself is not curved. The evidence needs to be drawn from examples which involve distances of billions of miles [no explanation here of how this might be done], so that the differences in the angles would show up.

It is still possible that space is finite, and indeed that distant galaxies are (as they appear to be) moving away from us through the expansion of space. The evidence for this is the phenomenon of the Doppler shift. The same evidence allows us to extrapolate backwards. As the galaxies are moving further and further apart, so we can infer that they were once very close together, and originated in an enormous explosion of energy which may

have given rise to the universe as we know it today, a finite length of time in the past.

Moore points out that scientists like to evade the infinite. If an infinite crops up in equations, there is a feeling that a theory is incomplete. Moore suggests that this finite point so long ago, doesn't eliminate the infinite, it reintroduces it. Mass and energy at the point of the so called 'big bang' would have been infinite, if that apparent beginning was a real event, there would have been infinite density, and infinite temperature and, had the mass not been travelling at great speed, there would have been the danger that the whole universe would have collapsed through gravitational attraction, and there would be a big crunch of infinite density. As may happen in the distant future.

With infinitudes, you lose the capacity to predict things. Which is another reason why scientists like to evade the infinite.

Moore concludes by recalling how the series opened, where the attitudes of the Greeks to the infinite were explored. He repeats his view that the Greeks had trouble understanding the infinite, and also found it hard to ignore it. Now we find ourselves in a similar position. Exploration of the cosmos invites us to reckon with the infinite, even when we are not sure what the infinite is.

The programme following (number nine in the series) began with a scene from the opera 'The Makropolos Case' by the Czech composer Janáček. The premise of the opera is simple: more than three hundred years earlier the heroine of the opera, Elina Makropolos, was given an elixir of life by her father, the court physician. She is now nearly three hundred and fifty years old. She has reached a state of utter indifference to everything, and her life has lost its meaning. In the opera excerpt she sings a lament: 'Dying or living it is all one. It is the same thing. In me my life has come to a standstill. I cannot go on. In the end it is the same. Singing, and silence.' Makropolos refuses to take the elixir again, and dies.

The opera raises some profound questions, about life, about death, about purpose, and about our finitude. But how should we understand our finitude? Human finitude has many facets. We live in a reality, which for

the most part is quite independent of us. We are limited in what we can know, and in what we can do, but importantly, we also have temporal and spatial limits. Though it isn't entirely clear what those actually are. Moore asks, as an example, if he began to exist when he was born, or if he was himself when he was still a foetus. Another question concerns how big he is. He gives his dimensions and weight, but points out that you could cut his hair off, or even amputate his legs, without destroying him. Some philosophers would argue that who a person is, is represented principally by the brain of the individual in question. And other philosophers might argue that we are not physical entities at all.

In any case, it is clear that human beings are not infinite in size. And, unless there is an afterlife, there will come a time when we no longer exist. Is the prospect of our annihilation something we should fear, deplore, and does it reduce our lives to meaninglessness? The Greek philosopher Epicurus did not believe in an afterlife. But the Epicurians did not fear or deplore death. They did not see how they should be affected by something they would not be around to witness. They were of the view that death was not an evil to us, since we were not around to witness it. Lucretius, also an Epicurean, reinforced the point by saying that we didn't exist before we were born, and the fact that we won't exist after we are dead, is just a mirror image of that. Lucretius asked, 'is there anything terrible there? Anything gloomy? It seems more peaceful than sleep.'

The twentieth century philosopher Bernard Williams went even further. Rather than dwelling on the innocuousness of being dead, he dwelt on the awfulness of being perpetually alive. He wrote a famous article which took both its theme and its title from the Makropolos Case. Its subtitle was 'reflections on the tedium of immortality.' He argued that a never-ending life would become what Elina Makropoulous's life had become – tedious to the point of unendurability. For Williams, it was about whether or not you could have a life of your own, if you could live for eternity. If you are going to live for eternity, it would seem that you would need to keep finding new things to do, or new ways to be satisfied doing the same things again and again. Williams' argument is that you can only talk about such a life as your own life if you remain reasonably close to how you started out. In

other words, can it still be your life if it goes on for eternity? Williams' answer was 'no'.

For some philosophers, it is straightforwardly obvious that annihilation, followed by nothingness, is a great and uncompensated evil. Moore quotes the American philosopher Thomas Nagel, who writes that being given the alternatives of living for another week or dying in five minutes would always (all things being equal) opt for living another week. If there were no other catastrophe which could be averted by his death. Which Nagel interprets as being tantamount to wanting to live for ever. He wrote that 'there is little to be said for death: it is a great curse. If we truly face it, nothing can make it palatable.' Moore suggests that the opposing points of view of Williams and Nagel may be the consequence of a temperamental difference, as much as an intellectual one. Nagel also suggested the possibility that Williams might have been more easily bored than he is. Moore says this might have been the case.

Moore feels that choosing the option of living for another week is not tantamount to wanting to live forever, and that he might choose the option while being appalled at the prospect of living forever. Where does this leave us? Some philosophers celebrate our finite nature, and others lament it. But there is consensus on one point, which is that finitude does not deprive our lives of meaning. Those who celebrated finitude say that it helps to confer meaning. Those who lament it, do so because, in the fullness of time, it threatens to take that meaning away. Moore suggests that what this perhaps shows, is that our finitude is what enables us to reach out and touch the infinite.

John Cottingham argues that there is something about us, though we are obviously animals, obviously biological creatures, which is restless and inclined to reach out. We have transcendent aspirations. What St Augustine called 'the restlessness of the human heart'. Our finitude fuels our aspirations to something more perfect than we are.

In the final programme, Moore returns to the words of the mathematician David Hilbert, from a lecture in 1925, on the nature of the infinite, which opened the series:

> The infinite has always stirred the emotions of mankind more deeply than any other question; the infinite has stimulated and fertilized reason as few other ideas have; but also the infinite, more than other notion, is in need of clarification.

Moore says that what we have seen in the course of this series amply bears out Hilbert's claim. Philosophers have pondered the vastness of space and time, the limitless of numbers, and the perfection of God. Many however, aware that the idea of the infinite is associated with paradox and mystery, have been disturbed by it, and have been wary of it. At the root of this division of opinion about the infinite, is our knowledge that we ourselves are finite.

There is something more fundamental to this than the fact that we are small and ephemeral. We find ourselves limited and constrained by what is utterly independent of us. This gives us a contrasting sense of what is unlimited, unconstrained, and self-sufficient. If scientific investigation should show at some point that space and time are themselves finite, still we would have this sense of the infinite. But it is a sense of something which eludes us. We might say that it is a sense of something which we cannot have any sense of. We are unsure of what to make of the infinite, and consequently unsure of what to make of ourselves.

Like the Greeks two and a half thousand years ago, we find ourselves on the one hand troubled by the infinite, and on the other hand, unable to ignore it. Rene Descartes took issue with the fact that we begin with the finite, and just think of the opposite of it; on the contrary he said that we begin with the infinite, and think of the finite as the opposite of that. And this led him to argue that there must be something in reality, something infinite, from which we get the very idea. Descartes had in mind God. There is a non-theological version of this argument which has survived into contemporary philosophy. Thomas Nagel is quoted on the idea of infinity in connection with numbers:

> To get the idea of infinity, we must understand that the numbers we use to count things, are merely the first part of a series that never ends. Though our direct acquaintance with specific numbers is extremely limited, we cannot make sense of it, except

> by putting them and ourselves, in the context of something larger. Something whose existence is independent of our fragmentary experience of it. When we think about the finite activity of counting, we come to realise it can only be understood as part of something infinite.

Thomas Nagel finds it striking that we have evolved in a complex way, in such a way that we have a grasp of very powerful objective truths – of logic and mathematics for example, and also certain objective truths of morality, and, according to Nagel, this means that our minds are what he calls 'instruments of transcendence'. Though we are finite biological creatures, our minds nevertheless reach out to grasp these objective truths, and that is a remarkable fact about us which Nagel thinks can't be fully explained by the biological processes of mutation and natural selection.

So an atheist such as Nagel nevertheless thinks we are in touch with something transcendent. The topic of this series is the infinite – what does the infinite have to do with what is transcendent? Perhaps these are two quite different ideas. Perhaps the infinite isn't anything grand at all. It might well be argued, as we have seen in previous programmes, it has been argued, that any time you move from A to B, you do infinitely many things.

Ludwig Wittgenstein tried to take some of the mystique out of the infinite. We naturally think that the infinite, if it exists at all, must be something awesome, and utterly beyond our comprehension. His view was that to understand the infinite, we need to understand phrases, like, 'and so on'. Simple phrases, which use simple grammatical rules, which finite creatures like ourselves, can easily grasp. "The expression 'and so on' is nothing but the expression 'and so on'. Nothing, that is, but a sign which can't have meaning but by the rules which have hold of it."

Moore suggests that, if we accept Wittgenstein's debunking, it allows us to separate completely the idea of the infinite from the idea of the transcendent. It allows us to treat the infinite as something quite tame, and unremarkable. Moore should realise this only applies to the potential infinite, and if the idea of an actual infinite, which has connections with the finite world, is baseless.

He continues by suggesting that, whether or not we side with Wittgenstein and admit that there is nothing to the infinite, beyond our finite linguistic resources and the rules governing their use, we must acknowledge our urge to think there is more to the infinite than that. We must concede that we think that there is an infinite with a capital 'I'. The unconditioned, self-sufficient, and transcendent.

Where does this urge come from? How does it manifest itself? In conversation with Moore, John Cottingham suggests that there are three categories in our awareness of the beauties of the natural world which seem to have something in them which isn't just a mere ability to produce pleasure in us – a special quality which is sometimes called a sacred, or even a numinous aspect. Another area is the requirements of morality, which I recognise as incumbent on me to observe, even though I may not want to. A third area is what used to be called 'the eternal truths' of logic and mathematics, which I recognise as necessary, universal and unalterable. So in all these areas I seem to recognise something which transcends, which goes beyond the ordinary contingent flux of biological and physical circumstances. In so far as I can recognise those areas, I seem to be reaching forward to what might be called 'the dimension of the transcendent'.

Moore comments that we have a sense of the transcendent then, and a sense of the infinite, with the capital 'I'. This is something akin to a religious experience. Or an experience of the sacred. It suggests something infinitely greater than us, which can give meaning to our lives. But how might such experiences be located in a secular world view? John Cottingham says that these might be understood in terms of weird, funny states we can get into, via psychedelic drugs, or by fasting, which would be a reductionist or deflationary interpretation of the sacred. If we don't want to go down that route, then we have to say that there is something about reality which calls forth such experiences, and they are not just a private 'trip', but a response to something which is real.

The weakest parts of this series tend to be when religion and ideas of what is transcendent are being discussed. The secular and finitist approach is a ball and chain when it comes to talking about the actual infinite.

Moore begins the windup to the series, saying this brings us right back to Descartes, back to the idea that the best explanation for these responses, maybe that they are genuine responses to something which is genuinely infinite, with a capital 'I'.

There is however another approach which Moore suggests we can take however, and he gives a striking example of this alternative approach, expressed by the British novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch. Whereas Descartes had said that our idea of God as something perfect and great, could only have been implanted in us by something real which is in fact so perfect and great. Iris Murdoch however turned this around, and said our idea of god was so great that nothing in reality could match up. God does not exist, and cannot exist, because something so great could not be confined by mere existence. But what implants the idea in our minds, does exist. And is constantly experienced and pictured. Incarnate in work, knowledge, and love.

Moore's judgement of the worth of Murdoch's formulation is sound. It might have been better to have started the series with this view of the infinite, which does not prioritise existence as a property which is necessary to what is real. Instead, it makes more sense to understand existence as something which is generated by the Infinite, rather than trying to locate the Infinite within what exists. Which is the principal difference between ancient and modern philosophy, when considering the infinite, and what is real. We look at important questions upside down, and are tempted to re-interpret what came before, in terms of how we think now. Much of our inherited history of ideas is bent out of shape, and sometimes unintelligible to us, having been deformed by many attempts to understand difficult ideas over many centuries.

This particular history of the infinite represents a more or less consensus view of an important aspect of the history of ideas. A consensus in philosophy however, usually means that a serious line of argument has run out of steam, and can tell us nothing new. I think that this is the case here. Moore's account is full of fascinating detail, but the overall narrative is open to question in a number of respects, and it is clear that the story of

man's engagement with the infinite could be written in a quite different way.

The Esoteric Conception of Divinity in the Ancient World

> "Enki's beloved Eridug, E-engura whose inside is full of abundance! Abzu, life of the Land, beloved of Enki! Temple built on the edge, befitting the artful divine powers!"
>
> From: 'Enki's journey to Nibru.' (Black, Cunningham, Robson, Zólyomi, *The Literature of Ancient Sumer,* 2004, p. 330)

The Sacred History of Being (2015) is about philosophy and its origin in the context of ancient cultic life. As such it argues that philosophy as a discipline is very old, as Plato himself said in the *Protagoras*, and that it was not invented by the Greeks.

In my twenties, I was struck by the strong interest the ancients had in the idea of limit – in art, architecture, philosophy, and ritual. This interest did not much seem to engage modern scholarly attention, with a couple of notable exceptions. Initially I had no idea at all what the significance of the idea of limit might be, and no idea where pursuing it would take me. Or that it would lead to a book it would take me four years to write, and which would reshape my understanding of human intellectual history in the process.

There is a standard form of image from the earliest years of civilization, which consists of two opposed figures, standing on either side of an object. The object can be a tree, an altar, a table heaped with produce, lotus blossoms, animal foreparts, loaves, and so on. The opposed figures can be human, animal, god or genie. This kind of image can be found throughout the archaeological record of the Ancient Near East, and in Egypt.

Questions arise from the ubiquity of this image, which appears in the context of those who had great power in the world, and also in funerary contexts, particularly in Egypt. It appears prominently in royal contexts in Assyria and in Babylonia. The image can be traced back as least as far as the settlement at Çatal höyük, now in modern Turkey, dating to some eight or nine thousand years before the present.

What does this image mean? It is nowhere explained, but clearly had some kind of explanation at some time, even if its transmission in later centuries was enabled simply by its status as a traditional iconographic element. Why is it so prominently displayed, so persistent throughout time, and apparently not discussed in the cultures in which it appears?

Some details of esoteric lore were written down in the Ancient Near East – the colophons of the relevant tablets make it clear that the contents were for the initiated only. The ritual procedures for the installation of divine statues in Assyria and Babylonia survive, together with some incantations which were part of the ritual. These tell us about the ritual, and the elements involved in the ritual – the thigh of a ram, best beer, mashatu-meal, and sacralised reeds, plus information about which stellar constellations and planets a statue was to be pointed at as part of the installation; and about the selection of craftsman's tools which were disposed of as part of the ritual (enclosed in the ram's thigh, and deposited into the river), in order to remove their responsibility for making divine images (not a thing for mortals to undertake).

But we find no discussion of the rationale of the installation ritual. Or discussion of the rationale of any other ritual which they documented. This suggests that there were levels in the esoteric life of Assyria and Babylonia: that the ritual details were important to record to ensure consistency in the performance of the ritual, but the meaning of the details, and the underlying rationale for the ceremony were transmitted orally, and never committed to writing.

The image with the opposed figures standing around a ritual object is clearly an image whose meaning and function was too important to record in a temple or palace document. In which case it might appear that we can never know what it signified, and why it was so important.

But, it is not so. Assyriologists have explored this image as it appears in the Mesopotamian context, and have made some headway in understanding the scope of its significance. They have established that, in terms of the iconography, the Sacred Tree may stand in for the King. In other words, the two ideas were understood to represent *the same thing*. The contemporary understanding of the nature of the role of king in Assyria was that

he was the Regent of the god Ashur on Earth, and therefore the king represented an emulation and image of the Divine on Earth.

But why a tree? The tree can stand in for the king, because of two further ideas which are connected in the definition of what the king is.

The contemporary scholarly definition of the Divine in Assyria, framed it as the source of all excellences and perfections, and all knowledge.*1 Hence the importance of excellences and perfections of the life of the king, as we find recorded in the Annals of Ashurbanipal in the late 7th century B.C.E. (found in the ruins of his palace at Nineveh at the end of the nineteenth century). As Ashur's representative on Earth he excels in military skills, in throwing the javelin, in horse riding, in the use of weapons; in divining the will of the gods through divination by oil, and other arcane skills; also in scribal excellence and mathematics – he is able to read the 'obscure and difficult to master' texts written in Sumerian 'from before the flood'. And so on.

The excellence and perfection of the king's skills were understood to place him in proximity to the god Ashur. He is thus at the limit of what a mortal may do and be; as Ashur is at the limit or zenith of Reality itself.
Ashur *is* Reality itself. That the Tree may stand in for the king suggests that it was understood also as an esoteric and symbolic representation of the idea of limit, taken to the nth degree, and also of Reality itself.

Much of the discussion found in Plato concerns the nature of what he calls 'The Good'. The Good is in a sense the Crown of Creation, and it is the target of human attention because of that status. He refers to the Good rather than 'God' because he is talking about the ultimate abstraction, which has commerce with other abstractions – as he says, 'things pass into one another'. The Good is perfect, complete, whole, and the ultimate source of justice, good order, beauty, wisdom, and all the other abstract concepts which have some form of existence in the temporal world. He is careful to say (through the words of Socrates) that this ultimate Reality, the Form of Forms, has 'no shape, size or colour'. In its nature it wholly transcends physical reality.

Plato's *Republic* tells of the craft of passing from the contemplation of one Form to another, entirely intellectually, and without distraction, with the intention of eventually arriving at the contemplation of The Good. The man returning from this journey comes back with knowledge beyond the scope of any wisdom to be found on the Earth.

The Platonic discussion of the Forms is treated by modern scholars as a species of literary fiction. Meaning it has no detectable connections with cultural activity in Greece, or in any other part of the civilised world in the two millennia before the Common Era. But Plato is very clear that it is important to look to the 'One Thing', the ur-Reality which underpins the world of the here and now. So he is talking of a conception of God, which gives rise to all other things which may be understood by the mortal mind, though the ultimate abstract conception of Reality may lie forever beyond human understanding.

How old is this conception of the Divine? If the Divine is understood to have its reality at the limit of physical and perceptible reality, and to be the most abstract of abstractions, historians of philosophy would say this notion was first discussed in Classical Greece. If on the other hand, the iconography of the two opposed figures, facing a ritually significant object between them, represents the most abstract conception of limit, beyond any physical instance, then this conception of the Divine *is thousands of years older* than the middle years of the 1st millennium B.C.E.

The Assyriologist Simo Parpola has shown that there is a connection between the Kabbalah and the Assyrian Sacred Tree. Each of the Mesopotamian gods was associated with a divine number, and sometimes they were referenced in documents by their number alone. He was able to reconstruct the Assyrian version of the Kabbalistic tree, populating the sefirotic nodes (understood in the Middle Ages as divine powers and qualities), with the key Mesopotamian divinities, their properties and numbers.

The Kabbalah enshrines a philosophical notion of transcendent divinity in the concept of the 'en sof'. It has been assumed by modern scholars that this is an imported idea, perhaps borrowed from Gnosticism in the early centuries of the Common Era. If in fact the idea of the 'en sof' was in the Assyrian version of the Sacred Tree, then we understand something new and profound about Hebrew ideas of divinity from the middle of the 1st millennium B.C.E. onwards. The relationship between the Assyrian and Jewish Sacred Trees which Parpola has been able to show, *by itself* pushes a philosophical conception of the Divine back to at least the 14th century B.C.E., which is when the representation of the Assyrian Tree first appears.

This philosophical equation of the idea of limit with what is transcendent is an important factor in ancient religious ritual. In Mesopotamia the ritual installation of divine statues took place in locations with clear boundaries, including riverbanks and quays, and a key part of the ritual involved a temple threshold, as the surviving texts tell us. These boundaries were understood to have proximity to the primal reality, the Abzu, house of Ea/Enki, in the sweet waters at the bottom of the sea. Reeds used in the ceremony were spoken of has having their roots in the Abzu. The association of limit with ritual performance tells us something about the logic of the installation: the rites serve to make the images one with the company of gods in Heaven. The statue becomes itself Divine by its exposure to repeated representations of Divinity in the course of what was described in Mesopotamia as the 'most sacred and secret of rituals'.

A great age for a philosophically conceived notion of Divinity, coequal with Reality itself, makes it possible to make much sense of many otherwise obscure texts and inscriptions which have been excavated over the past two centuries. The determination of classicists over two centuries (since the European Enlightenment) to downgrade and deny the connections between Greek civilization and other civilizations around the Mediterranean and the Near East, both in classical times, and in the 2nd millennium B.C.E., has made it very difficult to make sense of both Greek philosophy, and the intellectual life of the other cultures of the ancient world. The Greeks accorded the Egyptians the status of philosophers, and Plato represents Solon having conversations with Egyptian priests in the *Timaeus*, who had knowledge 'hoary with age'. But archaeological excavation in Mesopotamia and elsewhere, and the recovery of thousands of texts, made possible the idea of writing something like *The Sacred History of Being.*

The structure of the book is relatively simple. There are three main parts. The first begins with reflections on philosophy, both ancient and modern. This goes some way to explain how I came to pursue this project. The second half of the first part discusses the ontological argument, which has its origins in the early modern period, which has come to be the principal way in which the reality of Divinity is discussed. We have made it very difficult to understand ancient theological ideas by promoting the ontological argument to its current status.

The second part explores Plato's writing, and the strikingly different way in which Divinity was discussed. It also explores wider Greek thought, and earlier instances of the kind of understanding of Reality found in Plato.

The third part examines ideas common to Greece, Israel and Mesopotamia, plus the significance of the Assyrian Sacred Tree for the scholars of the Assyrian royal court, and the significance of the Jewish Kabbalah, which descends from parallel Mesopotamian ideas. Two of the chapters in part three work through the Mis Pî tablets from Nineveh and Babylon, which describe the ritual for the installation of images of the gods, and discuss the significance of the ritual.

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1 The Babylonian scholar Berossus, former priest of Bel, who wrote about Babylonian culture and religion after moving to Athens, tells us of the encounter of the first legendary sages with an emissary of the Divine. The emissary granted them knowledge of the arts and crafts, of husbandry, and the apportioning of land.

Unwritten Doctrine, Ancient Silence

Plato was quite explicit in the *Timaeus* that it was not possible to tell all men about 'the Father of the Gods'. It follows from this that if, as in Plato's case, doctrine comes from an understanding of the divine, then there must be an unwritten doctrine beneath the written texts which contains at least what makes sense to Plato himself, and perhaps an inner circle of peers or advanced students.*1

It is often assumed by students of antiquity that there is no special importance to be attached to remarks that certain items of information are to be kept secret and not imparted to the unworthy, and to the ordinary mortal. This assumption is based on the presumption that there was, and is not, anything of which it is impossible to speak, before those not used to dealing with information about religion and the divine. This is a curiosity of modern times, in that the ignorance of theology among the moderns makes it impossible for them to credit the importance of theology in antiquity - both to those who understood its subtleties and and those who didn't.

In other words, it is assumed that what is proclaimed secret is not something which, within the culture in question, must necessarily remain secret, because of its disturbing nature, with dire consequences which might follow, but is something local to a particular cult or religion, and is an artificially created object of mystification, created for the benefit of the cult, to increase the aura of that cult, and to promote its ideology.

We need to examine the scope of the phenomena we are looking at, and from the ancients point of view: if priests in antiquity proclaimed that the secrets pertaining to the gods should *necessarily* remain secret, what might be the nature and purpose of such secrets?

Naturally it is not being suggested that all religious structures and institutions in antiquity would subscribe to what we might call 'rational circumspection' and a necessary element of secrecy. But it is important to explore the possibility that sometimes, and perhaps for the most part, as it might turn out if we look closely enough, these structures and institutions had what they understood as very good reasons for this way of operating. It is too easy to write off this aspect of ancient life on the grounds that of course they would say this kind of thing about themselves and their institution even if there were no rationality at all in the practice. Certainly ancient religious belief was as subject to political manipulation and machination as in the modern world, but it does not follow that there was nothing more substantial to the religions of the ancient world than a purely ideological tool for a power elite who believed in absolutely nothing (though it might be perfectly fair to suggest that modern power elites believe in nothing but power itself).

If we presume the ancients did not believe in the rational sense of their religion and their cultic practices, at least at some level, then a whole raft of other questions would need to be answered, We would have no way, for example, of fathoming why the story of Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia in order to gain a fair wind for Troy, was credible to an ancient audience, and made some kind of sense.

Clearly the truth is likely to lie somewhere in between the two extremes of belief and disbelief in the tenets and imperatives of ancient religion. But if we do not explore belief and its reasons in antiquity, we can never know detail of the level of rationality in ancient religion. This is not a problem, if, as is implicit in many modern studies of ancient religion, we assume that religion is at root an irrational response to the complexity of both nature and human society. The argument that there may be a rational component in ancient religions therefore can be understood as *an attempt to elucidate the extent to which this might be true,* and to challenge the conventional view that there is nothing of the sort to be found there.

Plutarch gives some interesting information about Alexander's intellectual background in his account of Alexanders career, some of which I've already discussed in the chapter 'Logic, Sophistry, and the Esoteric in Ancient Education', but from a different point of view. He wrote that: 'It would appear that Alexander received from [Aristotle] not only his doctrines of Morals, and of Politics, but also something of those more abstruse and profound theories which these philosophers, by the very names they gave them, professed to reserve for oral communication to the initiated, and did not allow many to become acquainted with. For when he was in Asia, and heard Aristotle had published some treatises of that kind, he wrote to him, using very plain language to him in behalf of philosophy, the following letter':

> Alexander to Aristotle greeting. You have not done well to publish your books of oral doctrine; for what is there now that we excel in others in, if those things which we have been particularly instructed in be

> laid open to all? For my part, I assure you, I had rather excel others in the knowledge of what is excellent, than in the extent of my power and dominion. Farewell. *2

This is generally taken to be a reference to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. However at the time Plutarch was writing, perhaps the late 1st century C.E., or the early 2nd century, Aristotle's *Metaphysics* had not surfaced as a published work. *3 It may therefore not be a genuine letter. Nevertheless, the passage reflects the ancient perception of an *agrapha*, an unwritten and orally communicated doctrine underlying the public work of both Aristotle's Lyceum, and Plato's Academy.

What could possibly be of such importance to withhold, and from whom? The story of the prisoners in the Cave in the *Republic* of Plato gives the general outline of the problem. The simile involves a group of men whose only means of apprehending reality in a darkened cave is the shadows of things cast on the wall by the flames of a fire. For these men, there is no other reality. Were they to become aware of the fact that they were not seeing real objects, but only shadowy two-dimensional representations of real objects, this would cause them to have to restructure their picture of reality. The problem would be so much worse if they were released from the cave into the sunlight. Plato invokes the strength of the sun's light as part of the simile, and suggests that the prisoners would have to look at the image of the sun via darkened pools of water, before attempting to gaze on the light of the sun directly (as if one would ever want to advise this).

In the story of the Cave, the sun is the image of the Good, the Form of Forms, and the ultimate source of all representation and experienced reality. Plato, by means of the story of the Cave and its inhabitants, is illustrating his view that reality is an extremely complex phenomenon, and that it cannot be understood easily without preparation. Were the complexity of reality, or rather its understanding, to be introduced baldly to men unprepared for what they were about to hear and see, they would be unable to comprehend it for what it was, and might attack those who were leading them out of the Cave into the sunlight.*4

Anyone who has explained technical or abstract information - which is to some extent counterintuitive in nature - to someone who has a narrow and concrete understanding of the world and its parts, will understand something of the problem which Plato is addressing here. Explaining to an untutored musician that (for example) the modern piano keyboard has actually been detuned to make the full range of polyphonic composition possible, is likely to produce an adverse reaction, despite the fact that it is quite true. The reaction is likely to be complete disbelief, so used have we become to the tuning of the equal-temperament keyboard.

This of course is a relatively trivial example. The Good in the writings of Plato is a transcendent concept, beyond any earthly exemplar, and extremely difficult to communicate even to an educated and informed audience. Plato is clearly signalling that, beyond the simple difficultly of explaining the nature of reality to those who, for whatever reason, have been brought up with a weak and threadbare account of it, there is a necessary and unavoidable difficulty in understanding the concept of the Good and that the difficulty inheres in the nature of the Good.

The Good, as defined in the work of Plato, is taken to be Plato's own conception. Clearly it has something to do with the nature of the divine, though Plato is often read as if he is speaking purely philosophically, whatever that might mean in the context of ancient Greece. The Good is, as Plato discussed the concept, not something which we expect to find in earlier contexts. The remark of Christ in the Gospels that none should be called 'Good' but God, is of course made several centuries later, and in a milieu where Greek philosophy was familiar, *5 but when, in the book of Genesis, God looked upon his handiwork at the end of the first week of creation, 'he saw that it was good.'*6 Genesis represents a redaction of earlier texts, probably compiled in the fifth century B.C.E., in the time of the Persian domination of the near East. Scholars blink at this reference, and do not see what is there in the text.*7 No rational philosophical concept is involved.

The only public lecture Plato ever gave was on 'the Good'. It was not a great popular success, and treated the subject in such a mathematical way that the audience had great difficulty in understanding what he was talking about.*8 We might be on the right track by suspecting that Plato had no intention of being understood by the bulk of his audience, and that the matter of his talk was not intended for the ears of the multitude, in the same way that, contrary to popular opinion, the public utterances of Christ as reported in the Gospels were not intended to be understood by those who did not have the 'ears to hear'.

As already mentioned, Plato explicitly said in the Timaeus that it would be impossible to explain the 'Father of the Gods' to men. This was partly for the reason that the transcendent nature of the divine is beyond our capacity to put adequately into words, but also because, as illustrated in the story of the Cave in the Republic, the uninitiated individuals who cannot apprehend the nature of the Good directly live in a world of phantoms and illusions. Their reason is necessarily clouded because of that fact, since it must be impossible to come to sound judgements on the basis of a procession of phantoms bearing no constructive and causal relationships with one another.

So Plato's attitude to the ordinary citizens of Attica, of Greece, and of the wider world, was dismissive: they had no constructive contribution to make to the elucidation of the nature of reality, and it would be hazardous to give them details of the nature of the Good, since there could be no way of predicting what they would do with that information. They might even wish to imprison or kill those who might be foolish enough to wish to release them from their prison world of dreams and false opinion.

We know that secrecy was an important part of Greek cult, though much of religious life in Greece seems very open in comparison with other parts of the ancient world. Exclusion was an important aspect of religious practice in Greece as it was anywhere else – certain groups would not be allowed to attend religious worship, or at certain times, just as in Attica certain groups were excluded from participation in the political life of the polis. Yet the rites of the Olympian Gods have not come down to us, which makes discussion of Greek religious life very difficult for scholars, who are reduced to talking in the most general terms about the meaning of the Olympians to the Greeks. We do know about civic responsibilities in connection with the cults of the Gods, often from later periods than the classical, and from Greek cities in Anatolia during Hellenistic times, in the form of liturgies which had to be paid for by prominent individuals within the community, in order to cement their participation in both the cult and the life of the city.

From the point of view of a purely sociological analysis of ancient Greek culture, this information is perhaps more valuable that the detail of the liturgies themselves – however here we are looking at the ideas which form the basis of religious life. We do have hymns to the gods which were an important part of ritual in the mystery cults. These mostly come from Roman Egypt, and have late features, as might be expected. But otherwise they tell us something of the likely importance of a wide range of Gods in cults which were well established in the early history of Greece, say from the time of Pythagoras to Herodotus.

Pythagoras' own doctrines were taught as part of the life of an exclusive cult, and Herodotus mentions various cults in the course of his history. However, each time he makes reference to an important piece of cultic practice of some significance for his narrative, he makes it clear that he is not divulging that practice in the text, but is relying on the pre-existing insight of his reader (or listener, if the text was being read in public, as it seems to have been at the time of its composition). He says something like: 'those who are familiar with the mysteries of the Kabiroi at Samothrace will know what I mean'. This is of course extremely annoying for modern scholars, who at one and the same time know that there is some interesting reference being made, and that they have no idea what it is. So there is (or rather was), an esoteric reading of the text possible, as opposed to the surface reading which we now have to make, except in the rare cases where we can supply the deficiency.

Clearly the esoteric reading of the Histories of Herodotus made sense to his readers, and made the work richer in antiquity than it is now.

If we move forward in time to the neoplatonist Porphyry, who was a pupil of Plotinus, and look at his work on the images of the Gods, we can see that the same imperative of secrecy operates. Porphyry uses the conceit of a discourse within the precincts of a temple, in order to explain something of the import of images within a sacred context. Those who have only profane knowledge are asked to leave, which says loud and clear that there is another level of understanding, a sacred understanding of religious imagery beyond that available in the world of common opinion.*9 Of course Porphyry is delivering this imaginary discourse in the form of a written text, which is not subject to the kind of restrictions possible in the context of a guarded temple. So Porphyry's text has to do two things at once: *it has to reveal and not reveal at the same time*. Going back briefly to the supposed letter from Alexander to Aristotle, found in Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*, it is interesting to read Aristotle's answer to Alexander, in which he defended his action in publishing the esoteric doctrines of the Lyceum in the full light of day by saying precisely that they were 'published, but not published.' In other words, Aristotle was claiming (in Plutarch's text) that though the text of the *Metaphysics* or whichever work it was) contained information relating

to the esoteric doctrines of the Lyceum, communicated formerly in person to Aristotle's pupils, it did not publish the doctrines *in a form in which they were to be properly understood*.

The question might be asked in that case (if this exchange of letters was real, rather than being a way in which Plutarch could make clear his attitude to the nature of Aristotle's Lyceum, and a supposed esoteric level of Alexander's imperial mission), why were the doctrines published at all? The same question might be asked of Plato's writings, since he makes it very clear within the corpus that the invention of writing as a means of communicating important information was a great disaster, since formerly memory had been cultivated, and memory was of great importance to the understanding of the world.

Our natural response to esoteric levels of meaning is, in the absence of clear and overt information about these levels of meaning, to pass over these levels as absent, and of no consequence to us and our understanding. Both Plato and Aristotle published their texts as an *aide-memoires* of sorts,*10 principally for those who already had an understanding of the doctrines being alluded to in the course of Aristotle's text. We do not have this kind of intimate association with the doctrines at the heart of these texts, and so it would seem to be utterly impossible to penetrate whatever these doctrines might be. *11

The works of Aristotle are methodical and practical, and Aristotle himself is almost entirely invisible throughout his corpus. The opposite is true of the works of Plato. In a number of them we gain a picture of his outlook on the world. Sometimes his views are expressed through the words of his master Socrates, but often it seems that Socrates did not say these words – the description of Socrates by Xenophon for example makes him look like a completely different individual. It is important to remember that Plato's works are literary creations, and not records of real conversations and discussions, and so Socrates sometimes says things in the course of an argument which the real Socrates might not say – it is Plato himself talking. If we were to summarise Plato's outlook on the future of the world, we would say that he felt that the human race was ignorant, both of the nature of reality and of its own history, vain about its contemporary achievements and the state of life, and that even that class of human beings who had formerly possessed an understanding of the nature of reality, of the relationship between eternity and the secular world which was a mere moving image of eternity, of the sages relationship with ideas and images, and the Good, were forgetting the true import of the doctrines which had been imparted to them, or perhaps they were being supplanted in public life and esteem by those who had the outer form rather than the inner core of meaning, and hardly anyone knew of the difference anymore.

Consequently, it is easy to understand why Plato would write his doctrines down. The former method of transmission was failing, perhaps in the face of the sophists, huckstering wisdom around Greece – making it a competition between the arguments of individuals rather than as he might have conceived of it, a collective and binding braid of understanding built up over centuries, and perhaps millennia.

But, as in the case of Porphyry's work *On Images*, many centuries later, Plato would have to 'publish and not publish' at the same time. This is, if the case, the source of much of the difficulty with understanding Plato, in that he is *alternately revealing and obfuscating* the proper matter of his work.

If Plato was impelled to write down the doctrines of the Academy, however allusively and obscurely, because he felt the traditional pre-literate tradition of the transmission of wisdom from sage to pupil was falling apart, then Aristotle's justification would be inadequate. There simply would be too few informed readers to make the effort worthwhile. Which leaves one possiblity in Plato's mind*:* that it should be possible for an intelligent but uninformed reader *to reconstruct the doctrines from the information available within the text*.

This returns us to the proposition that the exclusiveness and secrecy associated with religious cult in ancient history might have a rational basis, in that certain things are not communicated directly, because such communication is likely to lead to misunderstanding, and possibly the persecution of those who discuss these ideas. Obviously a concealment by Plato of doctrines within a text could not be a purely mechanical process, in the form of an acrostic or some other word or mathematical puzzle, in that such a device could easily be deciphered by an individual possessing cleverness rather than insight. The doctrines would have to be concealed with much greater subtlety.

The subaltern tradition of the interpretation of Plato, from the neo-Platonists in the late Roman Empire, through Nicholas of Cusa, to the renaissance neo-Platonists of the Italian city states, and the late-eighteenth century re-examination of Platonism by the scholar Thomas Taylor, depends on an alternative interpretation of the writings.

For the past three centuries these interpretations have been deprecated as faulty – in the case of the renaissance appraisal of Plato the deprecation is so great that until the middle years of the twentieth century it was simply too embarrassing to include the sojourn of philosophy at the court of Ludovico Sforza in the history of philosophy. *12

These interpretations of the Platonic canon are now acceptable for scholarly discourse, though they still remain subaltern in nature. No tenured historian of philosophy would dare suggest that these subaltern interpretations of the doctrines of Plato, despite a strange and unnerving consistency, are on an equal footing with the modern consensus view, which centres around the notion that Plato is not retailing a traditional discourse about the nature of reality, but instead is exploring for the first time a number of philosophical problems, including the nature of the one, the nature of the many, eternity, being, non-being, participation, etc.

The modern academic historian of ancient philosophy is in a very tricky position. The later role of Plato and the neo-Platonists is now an accepted part of the currency of discussion of the rise of science in Europe. For the last fifty to sixty years, a great deal of valuable work has been done, centering initially on the Warburg Institute in London, to show that, rather than science and scientific method emerging as a consequence of inspired individuals working against the grain of their credulous time, in fact science emerged from a complex braid of ideas in play from the Italian renaissance in the 15th century onwards, all the way up to the early years of the 17th century.

So now the renaissance philosophers can and do appear in histories of philosophy, with their hermeticist and Christian-cabalist ideas acknowledged, their mathematical magic, their alchemical writings, their fascination with biblical prophecy, their necromantic rituals, their scryings, their conversations with angels, allowed as part of the birth of the scientific outlook on the world. The sequence of developments in the period – not always linear – has been examined in detail, and we now have a good understanding of the process – so much so that reference to the magical and cabalistic interests of the early figures in the history of modern science is part of the common currency of discussion.

For the early history of philosophy in classical Greece, by contrast, there is *no clear background to the emergence of most aspects of what is termed philosophy*, even according to the broadest definition of the term. Much of the history of philosophy in Greece is based on the discussion of the ideas of the presocratics and the sophists in the works of Plato, and also in the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle.

A late source, no more than a compilation made in the early years of the modern era, is also mined by historians (*Lives of the Philosophers*, by Diogenes Laertius). The resulting picture, painstakingly stitched together over a period of around two centuries, has been refined again and again, so that we understand as obvious that there was a chaos of competing and barely philosophical descriptions of reality and the world among the pre-Socratic philosophers, that the sophists would make the worse cause seem the better, and that Plato either invented or refined the technique of dialectic which often appears in the dialogues to be practised by his master, Socrates.

After Plato comes his most famous pupil, Aristotle, who finally formalised logical thought, rooting it in three principles – the law of similarity, the law of the excluded middle, and the law of non-contradiction. And from this crucial formulation, science as we understand it became possible.

The background of Greek culture seems a little superfluous to this picture. This is despite the fact that it is easy to recognise religious ideas of both Greece and the near east in the materials which are attributed to the pre-Socratics. And more particularly in the writings of Plato himself.

Philosophy has of course been redefined. In the twentieth century it experienced a transformation into its narrowest definition in the history of the subject. Now it is almost exclusively concerned with the limits of its own discourse, and with a logic-chopping approach to the development and use of symbolic language.*13 All of which is based on the three axiomatic laws of logical thought, despite the fact that a small number of eminent philosophers within the European tradition of philosophy have explored the concept of a paradoxical reality.

This is not a major problem however, if the subject as a whole has turned away from questions of ultimate reality towards questions of method of logical analysis. And indeed philosophy now has nothing to do with the former core interest of philosophers, having conceded questions of the nature of the world to scientific study, for which

they imagine themselves to provide a metric of clear thought; and also to theologians, for whom they have little respect. since their territory is now defined as beyond the legitimate scope of rational thought.

So the discussion of the background of Greek philosophy is not of much interest to professional philosophers in the twenty-first century. Historians of philosophy should be interested, but of course the connections between Greek philosophical ideas and the contemporary cultural background *aren't really anything to do with philosophy*.

Fortunately there are other scholars out there, for whom the modern straightjacket which has been embraced by the discipline of philosophy is no impediment to their interest in the cultural background to the rise of philosophy in Greece. The creation in the mid-twentieth century of the area of study known as the history of ideas, brought together a number of scholars from different disciplines to address the impact and dynamics of ideas in culture and thought.

However the relationship between Greek philosophy and its cultural background remains obscure. There is a tendency to picture philosophy as something which emerged from a background of superstition and credulous belief, and therefore the detail of the cultural background is not of great importance. What is important is the development of philosophy, and its emergence is evidence of the intellectual strength of those who managed to emancipate themselves from the folly of religious belief.

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1 That Plato had an unwritten doctrine is not itself an unusual view among Plato scholars – over the past hundred years a large proportion have taken this view – Paul Shorey being an example. However reasons for holding that Plato had an unwritten doctrine vary. Mostly the view arises because otherwise it is difficult to find coherence in the Platonic corpus. So the idea of an *agrapha* arises as something which contains the missing pieces in the structure.

2 Plutarch's *Lives*: Alexander.

3 There is an excellent account of the progress toward publication of Aristotle's manuscripts in the Penguin edition of his *Nicomachean Ethics* published in the 1950s. Like almost all of Aristotle's works which we possess, this work appears to be constructed out of notes made by Aristotle himself, or by his students. At least one passage in the Nicomachean Ethics clearly duplicates the content of another, if not in the same words, which suggests strongly an imperfect collation of notes by several hands by a student editor.

4 This is a clear allusion to the fate of Plato's teacher Socrates, who was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens.

5 Christ may allude to the story of Socrates and the cup of Hemlock in the *Gospel of John*.

6 *Genesis*.

7 Of course the determinant of what meaning is intended by the reference to what is Good is the context. And the context of a creation by the separation of waters and the creation of a vault of heaven does not immediately suggest the presence of a philosophical level. Near eastern kingship employed both the concept of the Good in terms of a final cause with which the King sought to be identified, and the mastery of the forces of chaos and order, symbolised by the disposition of the waters of the *Apsu*.

8 Cherniss, Harold., *The Riddle of the Early Academy*.

9 Though there are important differences in the doctrines of Plato and the neo-Platonists which it is important to observe in discussion, both Plato and the neo-Platonists were at one with respect to the idea that understanding was a property of the divine, and that lesser mortals, the uninitiated and merely common, were lesser beings precisely because of their greater distance from understanding.

10 Plato's account of the importance of memory makes it clear that any unwritten doctrine would be unlikely to be committed to writing, and therefore written documents concerning such matters must make sense as allusive texts.

11 *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval Philosophy* mentions this difficulty, referring particularly to the works of the Neoplatonists. The presence of an esoteric background is acknowledged, but since there seems to be no

way in to this background in the absence of a key, the only course of action is to evaluate the material in terms of the surface text. A.C. Lloyd, *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval Philosophy*.

12 The coverage of the Italian renaissance by Bertand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy* represents a bizarre attempt to give the period some kind of credit, without dealing in detail with the important figures. The section resembles a desperate lift from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

13 In fact the symbolic language of the logicians is anything but symbolic. Rather it is semiotic language – the whole point of logical language is to remove the last trace of ambiguity in statements, making it as far removed as possible from the language of human interchange. This is far from a futile activity: the laptop this text was written on is a direct consequence of the development of a language of mathematics and propositions by (in particular) Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead (*Principia Mathematica*), on which Turing built as a pupil of Wittgenstein at Cambridge in the 1930s, where he wrote his famous paper on 'intelligent machinery'.

Ancient Conjectures, and Fictive Intellectual History

The following text concerns the question of whether or not there was a philosophical basis for the development of religious concepts in antiquity, informing ritual, liturgy, divination, sacrifice, and the worship of images; and therefore, as a consequence, philosophy was not the exclusive possession of the Greeks in the 1st millennium B.C.E.

This argument of course turns the received view of the historical relationship between religion and philosophy upside down: we like to think that the development of philosophy was a practical response to religion as it became an outworn and irrational phenomenon, which preceded a more scientific approach to phenomena and nature. If such a sequence is in fact falsely inferred, and undermined by the evidence, then we have some rethinking to do.

The essay references both my earlier book *The Sacred History of Being* (2015), and the contents of *Understanding Ancient Thought* (2017), both published by the Anshar Press.

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What has been argued in part one of *The Sacred History of Being* is that ideas of Being, of the nature of reality, and the divine, were once understood in terms of conjecture about the reality (or otherwise) of the one and the many. These follow on from the initial question, which is: why is there something rather than nothing? Plato's argument, following on from propositions made by Parmenides, who declared that we should look only to the one, and that only the one truly exists, is the most sophisticated of all discussions in antiquity concerning why there should be something rather than nothing. Plato argues that we should always look to the 'one true thing'.

This is different from saying only the one exists, or only the one is truly real.

J.G. Frazer was very dismissive of Greek questions concerning the one and the many, saying that they constituted 'popular questions of the day' (in

his essay *The Growth of Plato's Ideal Theory,* written in 1879). The argument of Parmenides remained entirely undiscussed in the course of that essay. But then he argued that questions concerning Being were entirely barren, since nothing could be predicated of Being.

This of course is a spectacular instance of intellectual blindness, by which the richness of the intellectual matrix of ancient Greek thought was spirited into nothingness. We like to see Plato's discussion of Being as the surfacing of a human capacity to grapple with abstract ideas, and the marker of our emancipation from irrational ideas about the world and the gods. For Frazer, Plato was as guilty of intellectual error as any of his contemporaries, as well as his predecessors.

In late Hellenistic times, and later, there seems to have been a very poor grasp of the context of the development of philosophy around the Mediterranean. Nods were made toward the notion that the discipline of philosophy might not have been first developed in Greece, including (tellingly) at the beginning of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Philosophers*. Plato after all argued against the idea that this was so in the *Protagoras*, saying that it was of a great age – perhaps contemporary with the arrival of peoples from Egypt, who settled in the Peloponnese, and in also Crete.

He also presented Solon in discussion with Egyptian priests in the pages of the *Timaeus*, who found the Greeks very young, and not conversant with knowledge 'hoary with age'. Aristotle (in his *Metaphysics*) presented the commonsense view that philosophy was first developed in a place where there was a leisured class, with the time and resources to think about philosophical questions. He may have had Egypt in mind, since Egypt had professionalised priesthoods.

Later philosophers such as Porphyry suggested that key parts of Pythagorean doctrine came west to Greece from Babylon, in the late sixth century (Plato references details of this doctrine, without connecting it explicitly to Pythagoras). We have also seen that aspects of that doctrine can be found elsewhere in Herodotus' *History* (concerning Solon), and also in Homer's *Iliad* (Book 18), where a number of key details associated with the doctrine are run together in close order, without being explained (discussed in *The Sacred History of Being*).

The former Priest of Bel at Babylon, Berossus, moved to Athens, probably during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus in Egypt, and wrote about Babylonian history and philosophy (in his three volume work *Babyloniaka*), describing their system of knowledge as based on an initial plenum (without referring to it as such), using the image of an amphibious sage emerging daily from the sea, granting knowledge to man about the sciences, agriculture, and the practical arts.

Not much of this was of use to the Enlightenment agenda, which preferred to look at the development of philosophy in Greece as the first beginnings of a rational understanding of the world. And so the information was deprecated and ignored. The phrase 'I doubt that' is a dangerous one in the classics community. It is a way of saying 'this is not the consensus view of scholars and the profession'. Usually no discussion follows, since the opinion is usually an opinion of the worth (or otherwise) of evidence. Scholars weigh evidence, and they do so (they are convinced) with better tools than were available to ancient scholars. The judgement is fitted to modern requirements. So, as a result, it is clear that it is unlikely that Solon visited Egypt, and that Pythagoras visited Babylon. Tread carefully, or your credibility as a scholar may be in doubt.

Thus, the scholarly consensus is that philosophy is an autochthonous development. Why in Greece? The 'Greek Genius' won't cut the mustard any more, at least by itself, but I have heard it said by people who should know better. But during the high days of the Enlightenment, and the beginnings of what became the fully-fledged discipline of Classics, that is what the scholars wanted. Something pure and out of the orbit of other cultures, which, by definition, had no philosophy or anything which would measure up to something like rational thought.

Sometimes history is built backwards. It isn't just a matter of looking to the historical record and starting from that. History always has been in part about critical scrutiny of sources and judgements, even among the Greeks. But as Bernal pointed out in the first volume of his *Black Athena*, the critical revision was wholesale, with the purpose of creating what was imagined to be a representation of the true origins of European civilisation as Europe entered the period of the Enlightenment.

That was the agenda. To reinterpret the past, and in terms of a rational and enlightened understanding of the world. Hence, Diderot wrote not just about ideas and philosophy in his *Encyclopedia*, but also about the arts and crafts. The latter may have been wrapped up with myth, folklore, and superstition, but they were still essential to the rational life of man, so these were also added to the *Encyclopedia*. Everything from the past which served some purpose, or which could be made to serve some purpose within the rational enlightenment model of reality, was critically examined, and reworked to fit what was intended to become a new understanding of man and his place in a new world of reason. A new understanding of how man might live.

As I pointed out out in the chapter 'Logical Modality in Classical Athens' (*Understanding Ancient Thought*) there are in fact two logical modalities present in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle is mostly (though not always) concerned with the modality which has come down to us as the basis of formal logic. Plato is clearly aware of this modality, but, though no scholar has dared to identify the other modality as logical, it is. It is simply that to us, it does not describe relationships which should be described as logical. Plato thought otherwise, and talks about this logical modality often, in the *Republic* and in the *Timaeus*. It is connected with the doctrine of wholes and totalities (discussed in *The Sacred History of Being*), and is the basis of explaining how things may participate in other things, which is not a pattern of ideas which fits with Aristotle's general understanding of logic.

Why is this important? Simply put, it matters because it is the basis of the Greek understanding of how transcendent reality relates to secular and physical existence, which was a matter of great significance in the middle of the first millennium B.C.E. The doctrine also underpins the understanding of both transcendent reality, and the idea of the immanence of the divine. It also points to a rather strange conclusion about the nature of the reality in which we live and think.

It might be imagined therefore that this would be the subject of a great deal of scholarship. In fact there is very little on the subject. The dialogues

in question have been written about endlessly over the last two centuries, but, though Plato's discussion is noted, the fact that it is a form of logical modality is not acknowledged, and the conclusions which might follow from treating it as such, do not follow, and are therefore not discussed. It is treated as it is presented – as a series of secular mathematical and geometrical metaphors for how things might possess some form of congruence with each other.

As I wrote in the chapter 'Sweet Song of Swans' (*The Sacred History of Being*), there is very little appetite for attempting to understand Plato in his own terms. When he talks about transcendent reality, this is treated as some sort of literary fiction, which has no necessary properties of its own. When Plato talks about the Forms, this also is treated as a species of literary fiction, which Plato himself appears to demolish in his *Parmenides* and in the *Sophist*. Wnen Plato discusses the soul, it turns out that it is something which has the property of being connected with the Form of the Good, and so knowledge is acquired by the activation of that connection. He argues that we have forgotten what we knew (apparently) through the shock of physical birth, but it is possible for us to reacquire this knowledge. Deriving all knowledge from the Form of the Good is seen by modern scholars as a bafflingly impenetrable notion, since he talks about ascending *purely in the mind* from Form to Form, and then descending back to the world of physical reality, Form by Form, and says this is the only way to acquire genuine knowledge.

How can real knowledge be acquired in this way? Why should Plato argue like this? How can any of this make sense to us?

It makes very little sense to us, because we have lost the original doctrinal context of his discussions, and we are not that interested in attempting to recover what we can of that context, even for the purposes of a better scholarly understanding of what he is talking about. So the study of Plato languishes in the seminar room, taught and discussed from generation to generation by people who have no clear idea of what Plato meant. Books and papers are published, which clear up a minor detail here, discuss another one there, but do not leave us much the wiser.

We can understand the range of existing discussion about Plato in terms of what scholars *do not* or *cannot* understand about Plato, and their attempts to fit what they think they understand about his work into some kind of modern intellectual and critical frame. It is their minds, and the categories of their own understanding which are problematic, not the obscurity of Plato's ideas.

Other than that, reading Plato at least serves to teach us something about how we used to think, and how we may think, even if we understand very little of what he is saying.

One of the principal reasons we cannot easily understand Plato is down to the loss of an understanding of that alternative logical modality. So one of my concerns in writing about it was to restore knowledge of it, and a basic comprehension of why it is important. Not just for our understanding of Plato himself, but also for our understanding of his cultural context; the context in which philosophy was understood to be of inestimable value; and also for an understanding of some very strange things about the ancient world, which are all the stranger because (it seems) they made sense in antiquity (sacrifice, divination, idolatry, prophecy, omens, oracles, etc.).

One of the most valued books in my library is *Religion & Magic: Approaches and Theories*. The author is Graham Cunningham, who is a specialist in the ancient Near East. Anthropology is a relatively young discipline, though crowded with many points of view. Cunningham's book covers a wide range of these, at least in terms of summarising the views of those who first suggested those theoretical approaches. He divides the approaches into several sections, which are 1. German Pioneers, 2 Early Intellectualist Approaches, 3 Emotionalist Approaches, 4 Phenomenological Approaches, 5 Structural Functional Approaches, 6 Symbolic Approaches, 7 Recent Intellectualist Approaches, 8 Structural Approaches, 9, Cognitive Approaches, 10, and finally, Feminist Approaches.

All of these modalities for constructing an anthropological understanding of the human world were developed and used without any meaningful distinction being made between ancient cultural phenomena and cultural phenomena of modern times. I write carefully here, since there are

unpleasant assumptions in the discipline of anthropology, which have not yet been rooted out entirely. Anthropology was founded in the early nineteenth century, and the presumptions of the time are necessarily locked into the work of the pioneers. Many of these presumptions are still capable of being activated, and can be called into the light of day if you scratch the modern anthropologist in the course of discussion. The fact is that an unfounded equation was early made between the cultures of antiquity and the world of the primitive and the savage in the modern world (which the classicist D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson referred to as 'running folklore to the death').

So Cunningham's book covers two centuries of thought about culture, civilization, religion, magic and ritual. All premised on the assumptions, understanding and categories of knowledge of those living and working in those two centuries. Nothing about those matters is covered from earlier centuries. What the ancients had to say about the detail of their cultural life, when they wrote about it, is not consulted. What the Neoplatonists had to say about religion – and there is quite substantial material available – has nothing to tell us. It is as if the study of human culture, human thought, and the nature of man himself, began only in Hegel's study, and nothing of worth came before Hegel.

I could digress here, and lay out what came before in detail, but that is for another time. I will allow myself to say that Plato had something else to add to the pot, which is not covered in Cunningham's survey; the Neoplatonists (who thought of themselves as Platonists, but we will not let them be what they are) would have had added the same thing to the pot, as would some of the early Gnostic writers.

The Platonists of the Italian and English Renaissances understood what Plato was writing about, at least for the most part, and would be shocked that, not only do we not understand Plato, but that we have chosen to explain human culture in terms of a fundamental stupidity about the way reality works, and with a complete disregard for the way the human mind was once understood to engage with that reality.

In short, religion is seen by anthropologists and sociologists generally in negative terms (at least professionally – what they choose to believe in

private is a separate matter), as something baleful and poisonous to human culture and human thought, except to the extent that religious belief provides social cohesion, ideology, and rules of social behaviour.

What is Sacred, and what is Profane?

As I mentioned in an earlier essay in this volume, Frazer wrote off the significance of a number of ontological puzzles which surface in the writings of the Greeks, suggesting that they were popular questions of the day. It turns out however that some of these questions (*aporia*) cast a great deal of light on ancient patterns of thought and practice. They are worth looking at. Questions which underpin the ancient world view include:

The first, and the most profound of all, which is: why is there something rather than nothing? How can the existence of the physical world be explained? It has patterns of behaviour (natural laws), but it is not clear where both the physical reality and its patterns of behaviour originate, and what sustains both.

A second question concerns the nature of the reality which underpins the reality of the physical world. Is it itself, or is its nature compromised by the emergence of a physical reality? This question is prompted by the idea that reality, in order to retain its essential nature, cannot be multiple, and cannot be subject to real change.

Following from this is the idea that reality must be beyond measure, beyond size, beyond existence in physical dimensions, be uniform in its nature, be complete, and also without limitation. The implication of this view is that the physical reality which we experience represents a point of view of the transcendent reality. It is not real, but a representation or a complex medley of representations of what reality itself is.

It follows that all things, past present and future, are contained, as potencies, in the nature of reality itself. They are possible points of view. All things which have happened, and all things which may happen, are there. It follows also, that, given this point of view, all knowledge of past, present and future, all possible states of reality, are also present in reality itself.

This description of reality itself is a description of the plenum, which is something which contains all things. Not because it is a collection of things, but because it is, as it is, an undifferentiated whole. This is the reality

which was understood to underpin physical reality in the ancient world (at least by those of the sacerdotal class who had the leisure to discuss such questions). It transcends everything physical, measurable, definable.

Ancient accounts of the creation of the physical world however suggest that the created world was in chaos at its beginning. What does this mean? It means that, by whatever means the plenum gives rise to the physical world and its realities, by itself it cannot give rise to a rational creation. Its creations are not defined by anything approaching reason. The *Enuma Elish* from Mesopotamia has. For example, two distinct levels of divine beings. The first group is present during the initial creation, and the second group is responsible for the second and rational creation. The first group of gods are not gods after the pattern of the second group. The king of heaven does not have a name in Mesopotamia, or rather his name is his description (Anshar). It is two words joined together – 'heaven' and 'king'. In the Mesopotamian context both heaven and the king were understood as representations or images reality itself – representing some of the properties of the plenum.

In a sense therefore, the initial gods are simply gods which must be latent in the nature of reality itself, whether or not there is a rational creation underway. There must be a heaven, and there must be a king of it, if there is to be anything else. And somehow the first creation has to be destroyed, if there is to be a rational creation. The gods who are present during the first creation are there to serve the purpose of making it possible for there to be a rational creation.

It would be argued that we know these gods are real because we are now living in a rational creation. They also give rise to the gods who preside over the rational creation, and who have the power and authority to order the cosmos, and human society. In the *Enuma Elish*, Marduk is the king of the gods, and his properties are described. Each aspect of Marduk has a name, as well as a description, and each of those names represents a god. So in effect, the description of Marduk is a collection of the divine powers of all the gods. Each of these descriptions explains the particular form of rational and good order in the world, over which they and Marduk preside. So each of the gods can be understood as abstractions of aspects of the

rational creation. They represent excellences in the world. Marduk represents the sum total of these.

This is the clue to understanding much of the ancient conjectures as to what the divine is. Each described excellence resembles reality itself in terms of its properties. The excellence may serve social functions, as does a skill or specialism, but it should be performed for its own sake. The excellence is complete in itself, is whole, is at the apex of what is possible, and involves knowledge of the divine on account of its perfection. The performance of these excellences recalls the perfection and completeness of the plenum, and reinforces the presence of the divine in the world.

Which brings us to another question asked in antiquity: can the divine be present on earth, within the world of physical reality? In terms of its representation, yes, since there are many things which share properties with the divine. The ideas of the limited, and that which is without limit, that which is perfect, whole and complete in itself; beauty, justice and good order, greatness, etc. The list can be extended. Hence the importance attributed to these properties in the ancient world.

But can the gods have existence and reality in the physical world, without compromising their essential nature? Evidently this was considered to be possible, though always a matter for some conjecture.

Why was it considered to be possible? This brings us to the most astonishing and subtle part of the ancient picture of reality. We need to return to the question of whether or not reality retains its nature on the creation of physical reality. It is easy for us to imagine that physical reality is here, with us, and the transcendent world of the plenum is somewhere over the horizon. But that would make the physical world a partial copy of the transcendent world, which would make reality more than itself. It would be multiple rather than single and simply itself.

At this point, the human race made an enormous leap of understanding. Few would understand it fully and properly, but it stands behind the creation of civilisation and the great intellectual structures of the ancient world which we refer to as religions. The leap involved the recognition that, if reality was to retain its integrity and nature, then it could not stand

behind a copy of itself. And if it could not stand behind a copy of itself, then there is no copy. If there is no copy, then the reality and the representation of it on earth *are one and the same thing*. The physical reality which we experience through our senses is simply a representation of reality which possesses less coherence and is less rational than reality itself, and is subject to change and decay.

Many would have baulked at this idea. But the logic is impeccable. Further, there are several conclusions which can be – and were, drawn from this understanding. The first is that *all things on earth are representations of reality itself*. We may not easily read them as such representations, but nevertheless, that is what they are.

Secondly, if all things are representations of reality itself, which is infinite, then all things in the physical world which have the properties of finitude, also are infinite.

Thirdly, the representation of space and time and difference is an illusion. These things are not real, but simply represent what is actually real in such a way.

Fourthly, if divinity is equated with the nature of reality itself, then *all things are divine*, whether in Heaven or on Earth.

The fifth conclusion is that since it is apparent that not everything on Earth is infinite as we encounter it, even if it possesses the property of infinity, along with reality itself, then everything on Earth *has a double nature*. It is both sacred and profane.

The sixth conclusion is that holiness, divinity and infinitude are properties which can be put on and taken off like a garment (the Sumerian concept of the Mes instantiates this idea).

The seventh conclusion is that we have no independent reality of our own, and that the world is the property and creation of the gods. Our perception of it is just that. We can understand it as a wholly secular phenomenon, or we can recognise and understand it as the creation of the divine.

The eighth conclusion is that, in order to have good order in the physical world, we need to strive to become holy, acquire knowledge of divine

things, and to do divine things, for divine things are possible on the Earth. This is the origin of the idea of sacralisation, which is the putting on the quality of divinity.

Intentionality, Conjecture, and what is Holy

This is a suppressed chapter (to use the jargon) from *The Sacred History of Being* (2015). I removed it, together with some other chapters along the way, in order to focus the argument of the book more tightly. It looks at the role of intentionality in establishing commerce with the Divine, and the essentially phenomenological nature of how the Divine is both made and known by us. It draws parallels between the creation of gods in antiquity, and the setting up of saints in Heaven. Both represent instantiations of what is Holy.

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It is unclear that the realm of the divine has reality. It is real, and at the same time it is not. The puzzles in the physical world – the aporia - suggest that the only argument which satisfactorily accounts for the world of existence, is that it is a poor copy of the divine world. And yet the divine world is uncertain. So how 'real' is the world of existence? What is the way out of this dilemma?

The answer is intentionality. The objective world is subject to change, as is the understanding of men. We cannot know the full properties of God, because, among other things, God is transcendent of human understanding. How then can mortal man understand the properties and nature of the divine, and how can the gods have a genuine involvement in the world? The answer arrived at, it would seem, is that the human understanding does not need to encompass the actual nature of the divine in order to have commerce with it.

This is an exceptionally important point, since, beyond legitimizing commerce with the divine despite the definition of God as beyond human understanding, it also provides the intellectual basis for the creation of multiple gods. Essentially therefore the idea of isolating the properties of God, insofar as they can be understood, was understood to be a way of accessing the nature of these properties, and therefore to allow operations to take place, establishing a commerce between the divine and the world of change.

Concerning intentionality and commerce with the gods, if the divine itself cannot by definition be completely defined and understood, at least certain properties and attributes can be understood. These can therefore be defined and named as ways of accessing the divine. This does not at all conflict with the idea that the reality of the divine is conjectural. Instead this view argues that there is a *subjective component* in the reality of the divine, at least insofar as it is possible for us to have commerce with it. That is to say, some aspects of the divine are accessible to the human mind. We cannot prove that it is real or that it exists in any sense, but despite this uncertainty, there are certain properties of the divine which are indisputable. Proof of the whole nature of the divine is in a sense unimportant, since this cannot, by the definition of the divine, be demonstrated. We might then say that all connection with the divine therefore is an act of conjectural faith rather than certainty. The nature and power of aspects of the divine can be understood, defined, invoked and accessed by man.

Viewed in this way, we can see that each of the gods we encounter in ancient accounts represents a slice through the nature of divinity, so that one god has a special interest in one thing as opposed to another, a special set of characteristics or attributes, which more directly can be understood than an abstract and indefinable numinous concept of divinity. However the underlying numinous concept, in fact the objective numinous reality itself, requires to be real and present as the ground of being behind the multiplicity of gods.

This explains the phenomenon of henotheism, found in ancient polytheism. Pharaoh, for example, as the incarnation of the the divine on earth, could 'appear' as himself, or could appear in any appropriate form of the divine. When smiting his enemies for example, he might appear as 'Montu, in his great form.' He might be depicted on a temple wall as Montu, rather than in the form of the king. It might also be the case that a divine pronouncement might involve the speaker moving successively from the voice and vocabulary associated with one god, to the mode of speech associated with another god, as appropriate. This has been found in Assyrian records, where a courtier, recorded in a state of divine possession, speaks successively as the voice of different gods.

Considered in this way, the divine world is filled with a variety of gods. Some of these have been defined, and subsequently invoked. Other aspects of the underlying divine reality have not been defined or invoked, and remain as possibilities. In the world of existence, the divinities which have been defined were given representation in the form of images and statuary.

None of this should be taken to imply that polytheism initially arose from such a complex and philosophically subtle theory as this. We have much information about the growth of local pantheons in the near east, and the way in which local gods were absorbed into state pantheons, given increased importance over time, or diminished in importance, according to requirements. They would be given family relationships which they did not possess when they first arrived, and gain attributes and characteristics which they did not have when they were first born in the smaller urban centres.

We cannot easily know to what extent there was an intellectual model behind the creation of polytheistic belief and worship from its first appearance in the archaeological and textual record. It is likely that much of what has been written about ancient polytheism from an anthropological perspective is correct, and valuable to our understanding. It is just that the account is incomplete from this limited perspective, and anthropologists have hardly ever seriously considered the possibility that some intellectual ideas might underpin the phenomenon as well.

Those notionally equipped to explore this territory, the specialists in ancient philosophy and perhaps theologians, have had many reasons to stay out of this territory. For them, the possibility of the ancient presence of a sophisticated intellectual model, based on logical argument, is not something which can be easily entertained. This is something which belongs to the Greeks. Though the Greeks were polytheists, their polytheism antedates the beginnings of philosophy in the historical record, and therefore polytheism has no bearing on philosophy, or vice versa. Many writers on both Greek religion and philosophy have found this arrangement to be conveniently tidy and a boon to scholarship.

Shortly before I began this work, Pope Benedict visited the UK in connection with the Beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman. When I read the details of the process of Beatification (essentially of making saints), I was struck by the resemblance between the idea of this in the Catholic Church, and the idea of setting up gods in antiquity (explored in detail in *The Sacred History of Being*). The idea is that someone has to request the assistance of a person (in ancient practice the equivalent would be the invocation of a divine presence), now deceased, who showed especial virtues in life, and has to receive a response to this request which amounts to a miracle.

This is worth unpicking in detail, in order to understand the logic which is involved. It is not clear why someone would invoke someone less than the divine itself, if the divine is on offer, unless the virtues of a lesser being seem more appropriate. In other words, the prospective saint offers what looks like a channel which is more likely to be successful than the supplicant making a direct appeal to a God who is both difficult to define, and to know.

The Catholic Church itself promotes the idea of sainthood, and unambiguously points at likely candidates. Newman has been one of those for quite sometime. Two miracles are required for the final elevation to sainthood. Why miracles? Because miracles are defined as things which cannot be accounted for in terms of earthly understanding. These may (in the extreme) be things which defy our understanding of physics, but ordinarily are occurrences such as unexpected remission from terminal illness, which 'defies' orthodox medical science. This was indeed the case for the supplicant who invoked the assistance of John Henry Newman.

The argument therefore runs as follows: Newman has special status in Heaven because an appeal for his assistance was answered. Because the assistance defied earthly understanding and expectation, the result was a miracle which otherwise could not have occurred. Therefore his status in Heaven is proved. *1 Thus it is that the Catholic Church sets up saints on earth, and also in Heaven.

The Catholic Church is not based on polytheistic belief. So it is rather surprising to find that it supports the idea that divine intervention can occur via the saints, rather than directly through the divine father, or his incarnation on earth.

The only significant difference between the Vatican's idea of saints and the ancients idea of gods is that all of the saints are supposed to have lived human lives before being elevated to a divine status in Heaven. The ancients did not subject themselves to such an unreasonable constraint, and created gods who had never lived, and who could never have endured existence in the world. They could do this because they understood a formal and technical mechanics underpinning connection between the earthly world of existence, and divinity. The mechanics are still available to us in the records.

It might be in order here to recap a little on the nature of the intellectual model of reality which underpins polytheistic belief, as we find it reflected in Greek texts, particularly those by Plato.

The most perfect entity it is possible for man to conceive is God. God is reality itself. The world of existence as understood by man is imperfect, and consists of imperfect representations of reality. The world of appearance as understood by man is subject to change and corruption, whereas the world of divine reality as conceived by man is eternal.

God is real. Existence is full of representations, more or less false, more or less true. Reality and existence are opposed. Man can apprehend that this is the case.

Since existence is suspended from reality, as a poor image of it, it is subject to change. Since man is an existent creature, man's perception of reality is also subject to change. Both the nature of things which are existent, and man's perception of these changeable things, are perpetually in flux.

Man cannot have full understanding of the nature of the divine, since, by definition, the divine transcends the world of sensible reality, and existence. It is in essence transcendental, and to the fullest extent.

However there are a number of ways in which the world of existence can access the divine reality. Several characteristic features of the divine remain in the sensible world, and retain their divine natures. The connection does depend absolutely on the idea that the divine is complete, is total in its nature, is the ultimate limit of reality, and is the final end. These things have analogues in the world of existence, and so there is a route of commerce open between the world of the divine and the world of existence.

Man has connection with the world of the divine through things and properties which are present in the world of existence which participate in the nature of the divine. These things include: completion, totality, the limit, the end, the perfection of a thing, a nature, a property, or an act, and so on. It also includes infinitive and superlative action, and also its extreme opposite, inaction. Greatness too, which we found (in *The Sacred History of Being*) to be an insufficiently defined concept in the medieval version of an ontological argument concerning the divine, is also something which may open the way to what is Holy. The ancients also included 'fame' as one of the properties which connect man with the divine. If we explore the wide range of concepts and properties which can connect us with the divine, we shall find that justice, beauty, magnanimity, ethical and moral perfection, and honour, are also included in this list.

As already discussed, it is not necessary for us to have a complete understanding of the divine in order to access aspects of that higher reality. In fact a focus on particular characteristics, a 'bracketing' of the most relevant aspects of the divine, increases the efficacy of the commerce with the divine. Thus the intentionality of the supplicant is a factor in the opening of contact with the divine. There are other ideas associated with the strengthening of the connection with the divine which can be explored. These include reduplication, the striking together of images and concepts, the collection or heaping up of things, especially where these result in reduplication of properties; the act of drawing near to the divine, or to the image of the divine, and so on. The deliberate opposition of ideas and images is also relevant to the business of establishing a commerce with the divine. For connection with the divine represents an *alteration of state*.

And to reiterate a key point, none of this proves the reality of God. It merely establishes a range of correspondences between a concept of God which might or might not have reality. Instead, the entire intellectual system underpinning polytheism, at least in its later stages, was rooted in the paradoxical and transcendent notion of the divine, which necessarily defied human comprehension. So, there was no proof available, but within this world view, 'proof' conclusive to the human understanding would have demolished the entire edifice.

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[1] It is proved by the fact that it could not ordinarily have happened. This is a tacit admission that what is real, what is possible, at the level of divine reality, may be entirely contrary to what we understand as possible in the world of existence.

Excellence and the Knowledge of Divine Things

There is a telling passage in the seventh section of Plutarch's 'Life of Alexander', concerning esoteric thought, which was discussed from a different point of view in an earlier essay in this collection. It is couched in interesting terms, which we rarely associate with things which are esoteric because they are associated with divine things. Alexander's father, Philip of Macedon,

> seeing that his son was easily led, but could not be made to do anything by force, used always to manage him by persuasion, and never gave him orders. As he did not altogether care to entrust his education to the teachers whom he had obtained, but thought that it would be too difficult a task for them…. he sent for Aristotle, the most renowned philosopher of the age, to be his son's tutor, and paid him a handsome reward for doing so. He had captured and destroyed Aristotle's native city of Stageira; but now he rebuilt it, and repeopled it, ransoming the citizens, who had been, sold for slaves, and bringing back those who were living in exile. For Alexander and Aristotle he appointed the temple and grove of the nymphs, near the city of Mieza, as a school-house and dwelling; and there to this day are shown the stone seat where Aristotle sat, and the shady avenues where he used to walk.

Plutarch opens his life of Alexander with a cheerful complaint about the sheer extent of the materials available to him to write on Alexander, and defends some of the necessary omissions by saying that he is writing a biography, and not a history. So the details which are in his essay are there because he regarded them as important in showing Alexander's character, his disposition, and the content of his mind. On the basis of his sources he says:

> It is thought that Alexander was taught by him not only his doctrines of Morals and Politics, but also those more abstruse mysteries which are only communicated orally and are kept concealed from the vulgar: for after he had invaded Asia, hearing

> that Aristotle had published some treatises on these subjects, he wrote him a letter in which he defended the practice of keeping these speculations secret.

Plutarch references and quotes from several letters from Alexander, and from a diary, so it is likely that there were such things in circulation in Plutarch's time, as well as the writings of his companions. Here he mentions Aristotle's doctrines of morals and politics, which we would expect, given that he wrote extensively on these subjects (there is a volume on politics; he and his students compiled the constitutions of each Greek polis, only one of which has come down to us; and there are three different works on ethics extant, which are probably lecture notes compiled by his students); but he also references an esoteric level of teaching which Aristotle imparted – 'those more abstruse mysteries… communicated orally and kept concealed from the vulgar'.

The esoteric is the opposite of the exoteric, or surface meaning of a doctrine. Plato's teaching was also conducted at two levels, the inside and the outside, referred to as *ta eso* and *ta exo* in the *Theatetus*. Plutarch however suggests by his wording that there is an esoteric level to an understanding of Aristotle's teaching on both morals and politics, but the teaching of those mysteries are less abstruse.

How could we ever know what those abstruse mysteries might be? It would seem to be impossible. But the clue is in Alexander's letter sent from Asia to complain about Aristotle's publication of some treatises on these subjects. The letter is quoted as follows:

> "Alexander to Aristotle wishes health. You have not done well in publishing abroad those sciences which should only be taught by word of mouth. For how shall we be distinguished from other men, if the knowledge which we have acquired be made the common property of all? I myself had rather excel others in excellency of learning than in greatness of power. Farewell."

This is a revealing answer. The objection is connected with the idea of excellence in learning and knowledge, and excelling in that knowledge, in order to be distinguished from other men. We can take from this

statement, which places temporal greatness as a poor second to knowledge of abstruse things, that Alexander is referencing knowledge of divine things, and consequently the principle of excellence itself.

This adds a whole new level to the endless references in the contemporary literature on Alexander to the question of whether or not he was divine by birth, whether he thought himself to be divine, whether or not he should receive divine honours, or if he was in pursuit of actual divinity. In modern times the details and significance are not discussed as they were in antiquity, since scholars have no sense of how important such questions were at the time. We flatten everything into a discussion of the pursuit of power, status and political ideology. We have a glimpse here of the real context of Alexander's understanding of what was important.

Plutarch gives the import of Aristotle's reply to Alexander, saying that:

> To pacify him…. [he] wrote …. that these doctrines *were published, and yet not published*: meaning that his treatise on Metaphysics was only written for those who had been instructed in philosophy by himself, and would be quite useless in other hands.

The emphasis is mine. So again, we have the assertion, this time from Aristotle, that there is an inside and an outside understanding of his doctrine, and accepts that details of both are in the text. He excuses this on the grounds that it was 'only written for those who had been instructed in philosophy… and would be quite useless in other hands'.

So the clue is in the teaching of philosophy. Philosophy, at least when taught at an esoteric level, gives useful knowledge of what is excellent, and what is divine. Without philosophy, such knowledge is not to be had. This is a clear indication that philosophy and philosophical questions and puzzles were understood to lie behind doctrine and teaching concerning the divine.

Plutarch then goes on to illustrate Alexander's interest in excellence, by suggesting that Aristotle:

> … more than anyone else implanted a love of medicine in Alexander, who was not only fond of discussing the theory, but used to prescribe for his friends when they were sick, and order them to follow special courses of treatment and diet, as we gather from his letters. He was likewise fond of literature and of reading, and we are told by Onesikritus that he was wont to call the *Iliad* a complete manual of the military art, and that he always carried with him Aristotle's recension of Homer's poems, which is called 'the casket copy,' and placed it under his pillow together with his dagger. Being without books when in the interior of Asia, he ordered Harpalus to send him some. Harpalus sent him the histories of Philistus, several plays of Euripides, Sophokles, and Æschylus, and the dithyrambic hymns of Telestus and Philoxenus.

Again, Plutarch reinforces the importance of excellence to Alexander, saying that when he was a youth:

> … used to love and admire Aristotle more even than his father, for he said that the latter had enabled him to live, but that the former had taught him to live well.

And living well is a main focus of Aristotle's published work. Though the relationship later cooled,

> he never lost that interest in philosophical speculation which he had acquired in his youth, as is proved by the honours which he paid to Anaxarchus, the fifty talents which he sent as a present to Xenokrates, and the protection and encouragement which he gave to Dandamris and Kalanus.

Philosophical speculation of course implies a degree of conjecture in discussion, and the fact that not everything is known or knowable by the merely mortal. Knowledge of the importance of excellence is however one way in which the divine can be approached, and that appears to have been an important component in Alexander's mission.

This idea can be traced in Plato's writing also. In the *Protagoras*, he suggests (through Protagoras) that the practice of philosophy is very

ancient among the Greeks, and not something relatively newly invented. He suggests that it is widespread,

> and particularly in Crete and Lacedaemon; and there are more sophists there than in any other country.

Echoing Alexander's view that philosophy, at least at an esoteric level, should be communicated only by oral teaching, in order that those who have studied philosophy should excel others in the knowledge of excellence, Protagoras says that:

> They dissemble, however, and pretend that they are unlearned, in order that it may not be manifest that they surpass the rest of the Greeks in wisdom (just as Protagoras has said respecting the sophists); but that they may appear to excel in military skills and fortitude; thinking if their real character were known, that all men would engage in the same pursuit. But now, concealing this, they deceive those who laconize in other cities. [Protagoras 342a-b]

So the Cretans and the Spartans wished not only to conceal knowledge of excellence, but to conceal that they excelled in knowledge of excellent things.

To us Plato's admiration of the Spartans has always seemed rather improbable, since we have followed the account of the Spartans written by Xenophon which reveals nothing which supports the idea that the Spartans were superior in philosophy – nor even that they were interested in the practice.

What advantage could they gain for themselves by restricting public understanding of their practice of philosophy? The exchange between Aristotle and Alexander gives us the clue. It is about the knowledge of excellence, and of divine things which is attained through the practice of philosophy. The use of the word 'wisdom' in connection with the Spartan practice of philosophy is significant: we are accustomed to keeping philosophy and religion apart in the study of the past; however 'wisdom' is a concept which appears in ancient sources in the context of both philosophy *and* religion. If the practice of philosophy among the Spartans was in some way connected with their religion, and perhaps their model of

reality, this would supply an explanation of their reticence, and the general reticence of Greeks in discussing religious matters.

Plato's *Protagoras* tells us that the Lacedaemonians have imitators, who imitate only surface details because they have no knowledge of their real interests and skills.

> But the Lacedaemonians, when they wish to speak freely with their own sophists,… expel these laconic imitators, and then discourse with their sophists, without admitting any strangers to be present at their conversations. Neither do they suffer any of their young men to travel into other cities, as neither do the Cretans, lest they should unlearn what they have learnt. But in these cities, there are not only men of profound erudition, but women also. And that I assert these things with truth, and that the Lacedaemonians are disciplined in the best manner in philosophy and discourse.

Protagoras also tells us that:

> …if any one wishes to converse with the meanest of the Lacedaemonians, he will at first find him, for the most part apparently despicable in conversation, but afterwards, when a proper opportunity presents itself, this same mean person, like a skilled jaculator, will hurl a sentence worthy of attention, short, and contorted; so that he who converses with him will appear to be in no respect superior to a boy. That to laconize, therefore, consists much more in philosophising, than in the love of exercise, is understood by some of the present age, and was known to the ancients; they being persuaded that the ability of uttering such sentences as these is the province of a man perfectly learned. Among the number of those who were thus persuaded, were Thales the Milesian, Pittacus the Mitylenaean, Bias the Prienean, our Solon, Cleobulus the Lindian, Miso the Chenean, and the seventh of these is said to be the Lacedaemonian Chilo. All these were emulators, lovers, and disciples of the Lacedaemonian erudition.' [342b-343a]

Protagoras reminds us that the Spartans…'assembling together, consecrated to Apollo the first fruits of their wisdom, writing in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi those sentences which are celebrated by all men, viz. "Know thyself", and "Nothing too much"'. He tells us this in order 'to show that the mode of philosophy among the ancients was a certain laconic brevity of diction' [343b]

Of course it is always possible that this is an elaborate jest on Plato's part: attributing a philosophical inclination to a people famous for a disinclination to the mental life. Yet many Spartan pronouncements are very famous (those in the preceding passage included), and of course the Cretans are memorialized in the philosophical conundrum 'All Cretans are liars: I am a Cretan'.

Socrates was forced to drink the poison Hemlock after being found guilty of both corrupting the youth of Athens and of atheism. The first charge is related to the second in that he was sowing doubt among the youth of Athens about the existence of the gods. In other words, the sin of Socrates was seen among his peers as one committed against the religion of the Athenians.

If so, it would appear that we owe our knowledge of the practice of philosophy in Greece to the fact that in Attica, in the middle years of the first millennium B.C.E., the practice of philosophy was somehow prised free from its religious context, in that we have a very public show of philosophy from the presocratics onwards. That philosophy was understood to be, however, not entirely beyond the scope of the arbitration by the religious authorities, is shown by the charges brought against Plato's master Socrates, and the severity of the judgement against him.

Egypt in the Shadows

This is a discussion of an interesting response from a doctoral student studying philosophical theology at the University of Oxford, on the question of whether or not the Greeks were the first to practice philosophy, or whether philosophy was first practiced by the Ancient Egyptians, and also in ancient India. The response, which appeared originally as a post on Quora, reveals a great deal about the presumptions western scholars bring to bear on such questions.

He begins by referencing Frederick Copleston on the question. Frederick Copleston wrote a voluminous *History of Philosophy*, the first volume of which was published in 1944. As he says, it was one of the most widely used histories of philosophy for decades. There was, and still is, nothing quite as comprehensive available to scholars, though the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is perhaps its nearest rival. Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* is short in comparison, and in some cases covers important subjects rather crudely, and with much important detail missing. All three are focussed on Western philosophy, and aren't much concerned to establish connections with bodies of thought elsewhere.

The student tells us that Copleston '…considers the claim that Greek philosophy was derived from Egyptian, Indian or Chinese Philosophy and rejects it.' He gives some reasons for Copleston's rejection of the notion that Greek philosophy owed something to other cultures:

> …[he] explains that the idea that Greek philosophy was derived from Egyptian philosophy originated in Alexandria during the Hellenistic era. (As I'm sure you know, Socrates taught Plato, Plato taught Aristotle, Aristotle taught Alexander the Great whose conquests inaugurated the Hellenistic era, and who founded the city of Alexandria in Egypt). As Copleston also points out, Philo, a Jewish writer who lived in Alexandria during the Hellenistic era claimed philosophy was a Jewish invention, because Moses was a philosopher, and the Torah is a work of philosophy. In other words, when the prestige of Greek philosophy was established, people from other cultures liked to claim "Of course, we invented that first", and they could point to old writings and say "See, that is philosophy." But of course, the Torah isn't philosophy.

The argument that Greek philosophy was a phenomenon which owed something to Egyptian philosophy, and perhaps Moses, is an old one, and it is true that there was a great deal of competitiveness between cultures during the Hellenistic era. The Babylonian priest of Bel, Berossus, wrote an extensive work, the *Babyloniaka*, in order to show the antiquity of Babylonian civilisation by means of a kinglist stretching back many thousands of years, and quoted stories to illustrate the sophistication of that civilisation.

Among these stories we find a description of the Babylonian myth of the Creation (The *Enuma Elish*), and an account of how man came to acquire useful knowledge from a Divine sage (apkallum). Unfortunately the *Babyloniaka* has been lost for at least fifteen hundred years, possibly more, but the Christian scholar Eusebius made extensive excerpts from it. The general accuracy of the account of Eusebius is confirmed by the fact that we now have access to original Mesopotamian cuneiform texts which describe the Babylonian creation.

The Egyptian scholar Manetho also produced a chronology of Ancient Egypt during the same period, which covered a notional timescale of 432 thousand years, and the thirty-plus dynasties he describes, which (apart from the earliest, which are regarded as entirely mythical) now form the basis of the chronology used by Egyptologists. Again, Manetho's chronology has come down to us largely via the pages of Eusebius. This list of dynasties, at least in its later phases, also bears some relationship to the chronology as represented in papyri and inscriptions found in Egypt. The Persian invaders in the 5th century (including Darius) are represented as pharaohs by Manetho, and also by the Egyptian records which survive.

In addition, Plato tells us in the *Timaeus* that his ancestor Solon visited Egypt, and spoke with Egyptian priests, who told him that the Greeks were very young, and did not possess knowledge 'hoary with age'. Herodotus mentions that the names of some of the Greek gods came from Egypt. The philosopher Isocrates, a contemporary of Plato, refers explicitly to Egyptian philosophy in his *Busiris*. Pythagoras travelled around the Levant and the Ancient Near East collecting knowledge from priests and philosophers, including those in Egypt. Plato himself in his *Protagoras* describes philosophy as a very old practice, and tell us that it was practised in Sparta and in Crete -

both territories which received an influx of people from north Africa and Egypt in the middle to late 2nd millennium B.C.E.

But intense cultural competitiveness is insufficient to explain the persistence of the idea that the Egyptians were philosophers. Copleston had not studied Egypt, and pulled this idea out of the air.

Many Greek words have plausible etymologies from Egyptian. Some of the concepts used by Aristotle in his philosophical writing were known to Egyptians nine hundred years before his time, such as the idea of completion (it is connected with the idea of birth and coming forth in Akhenaten's 'Hymn to the Aten', which dates to the fourteenth century B.C.E).

As for the claim that the Jews practiced philosophy, this cannot be written off as an empty claim by Philo Judaeus. There is abundant evidence for the existence of philosophical thought among the Jews in the books of the Old Testament. Yahweh is described as 'the first and last, and beside me there is no God'. His name (minus the vowels) is a variant of the verb 'to be', which suggests that his isolation is due to the fact that he was understood to be Being itself. In the third chapter of Malachi, Yahweh says 'I do not change', which is a characterisation of the nature of Being which would have been familiar to philosophers and sages around the Mediterranean and the Near East. It is an explicitly philosophical description of Being itself, since Being cannot be what it is, if it is subject to change.

What we don't have from Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Hebrew Kingdoms is recorded philosophical discussions which closely parallel the writings of Greek philosophers. There is nothing strange in that. What is strange is that we have philosophical arguments from Greece, since, as noted elsewhere in this volume, both Plato and Aristotle distinguished two forms of teaching: exoteric and esoteric. The exoteric teaching was suitable for anyone to hear, but the esoteric teaching was of a different nature, and was restricted to those who were capable of understanding it. Which means that they were discussing matters relating to the gods, and to divine things. So in the versions of these discussions which were circulated, there is often elision, obfuscation, misdirection, and alternative terminology. Plato does not refer to the 'one true thing' as god, but as 'the Good', for this reason. Arguments which are not resolved in the course of discussion, are deemed to 'necessarily' be the case, for otherwise communion with the gods would be impossible, or motion would be impossible, etc. The genealogy of the gods is not discussed, as too complicated a matter, and those who claim to have divine ancestors (says Plato), should know the truth of the matter better than anyone else.

In the 2nd century CE, the Christian theologian Clement of Alexandria wrote:

> Philosophy, then, with all its blessed advantages to man, flourished long ages ago among the barbarians, diffusing its light among the gentiles, and eventually penetrated into Greece. Its hierophants were the prophets among the Egyptians, the Chaldeans among the Assyrians, the Druids among the Galatians, *the Sramanas of the Bactrians*, and the philosophers of the Celts, the Magi among the Persians…. and *among the Indians the Gymnosophists*, and other philosophers of barbarous nations.
>
> *— Clement of Alexandria, Stromata 1.15.71 (ed. Colon. 1688 p. 305, A, B).*

Alexander himself consulted the Gymosophists when he arrived in India, and we have what purports to be some of their conversation together in Plutarch's life of Alexander. The idea that only the Greeks practiced philosophy was not what he had been taught by Aristotle. Aristotle argued that philosophy began when there existed a leisured class with time to think and conjecture (by which he probably had in mind the fully professional class of priests in Egypt). Diogenes Laertius also mentioned that there was a school of thought in existence which argued that philosophy originated outside Greece.

One of the reader comments by which follows the Quora post by the student, articulates the important question:

> …. define "philosophy." Are alchemical texts philosophy? Is divination (an attempt at?) philosophy? Is a discourse on mystical states philosophy? Is mythology philosophy? You can argue that there are philosophical dimensions to all of these things. The Bhagavad Ghita certainly waxes philosophical, and some sections are oddly reminiscent of Parmenides (or Parmenides is reminiscent of the Ghita).

Is there nothing philosophical in this passage from a hymn to the Sun-God from Egypt?

> Grant that I may come into the everlasting heaven and the mountain where thy favoured ones dwell. Let me join myself to those who are holy and perfect in the divine Underworld, and let me appear with them to behold thy beauties at eventide. I lift my hands to thee in adoration when thou the living one dost sets. Thou art the Eternal Creator and art adored at thy setting in heaven.
>
> From the *Papyrus of Ani*. *1

It is a passage which expresses a desire for union with the divine, the creator of the world. Union with what is holy and perfect. And expresses adoration for what is beautiful in heaven when it (the living one) meets the limit of what it is. Is that not something like Plato's conception when he talks about the philosopher ascending to the Good via the Forms?

Murphy in fact redefines what he will accept as philosophy, in a manner reminiscent of James Frazer: he embraces what is practical and useful. Which is not how philosophy was understood in antiquity. Ironically the possibility of an Egyptian contribution to the development of philosophy is sometimes dismissed by modern scholars because they consider that Egyptians dealt in concrete practicalities and useful things, and were simply not capable of abstract thought. He says:

> ...Greece is the starting point for what would become a strictly logical philosophy based on reasoning and empiricism. There's some stuff about gods and afterlives in Plato, of course, but by the time you get to Aristotle, you find elaborate theories on the external world using what is not yet a rigorously scientific method but still draws on observation of the world around us to draw general conceptual conclusions using reasoning.

He concludes:

> ...Greece is credited - rightfully, in my opinion - with giving birth to the philosophy that would later become science. That, I think, is what ultimately makes us defer to the Greeks.

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1. The *Papyrus of Ani* is a papyrus manuscript created c. 1250 B.C.E. Egyptians compiled an individualized book for certain people upon their death, called the 'Book of Going Forth by Day', containing declarations and spells to help the deceased in the afterlife. The Papyrus of Ani is the manuscript compiled for the Theban scribe Ani. This papyrus was (shockingly) stolen from an Egyptian government storeroom in 1888 by Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, which theft he describes in *By Nile and Tigris*, for the collection of the British Museum. Before he shipped the manuscript to England, Budge cut the seventy-eight foot scroll into thirty-seven sheets of nearly equal size, damaging its integrity.

Polytheism, Monotheism, and the Cult of the Aten

There is a scholarly view of Polytheism and monotheistic belief in antiquity, which is often quite subtly nuanced. And there is the public view, put about by popularisers, and in religious education classes. The latter view is a simple one, which provides support for the idea that modern religious belief is improved in some way. It suggests that monotheism represents an intellectual advance on polytheistic belief, and provided a basis for cultural unification which was not present before the introduction of the idea. In the public mind there is a simple sequence of polytheism being superseded by monotheism.

There are two candidates which appear to illustrate this transformation, for the argument requires something resembling evidence: the earliest being the supposed intellectual revolution undertaken by the Pharaoh Akhenaten. This revolution failed to the extent that great effort was expended by the other priesthoods in Egypt to obliterate all mention and memory of Akhenaten's name and actions. He was referred to as 'that heretic' by succeeding generations.

The second candidate is the god of the Hebrews, and the supposed development of monotheism. The revolution is recorded in the Pentateuch as the work of Moses. The Hebrew god is shown as being more efficacious than other Levantine Gods (it is to be remembered that, according to the Pentateuch, Yahweh was introduced to the Hebrews before their migration into the land of the Canaanites). *1 This revolution was successful, even if it did not prove a happy transformation for the Hebrews, since later on, it led to the destruction of much of their cultural life, when they were in conflict with Rome. It provided a background for the development of Christianity. The Christian religion, particularly once taken over as the state religion of Rome, oversaw the final destruction of the great polytheistic systems of thought in Assyria, Babylonia, and in Egypt.

The scholarly view has long known that polytheistic belief in the ancient world is complex and much more than just a world of many gods. Divinities were not seen as entirely discrete, and it was possible for principal figures in a pantheon to embrace the lesser gods. Thus the Mesopotamian god Marduk embraced the other gods, and their properties. Gods could appear in the form of other gods – this is expressly described in Egyptian texts, where a god king could appear (for example) in the form of the warrior god Montu, slaying his enemies, whatever the King's principal divine cult was. In Assyria, an individual possessed by a god might speak a few lines in the character of one god, and in succeeding sentences, speak in the voice of another god. This was conceivable if all of the gods were connected together in a kind of primordial monotheism, which we now describe with the term 'henotheism'. As a consequence of this way of thinking, the worship of one god did not preclude the recognition of other gods, since they represented related aspects of the worshipped god.

The importance of this phenomenon is that it indicates that the concept of the gods was understood to some extent as a continuum, and that each of the gods represented a different characterization of the divine. The individual gods in effect offered different connections with divinity.

Rome under the republic consolidated its power over conquered territories and people through the assimilation of local gods. While Rome still worshipped its pantheon of gods, such assimilation of local gods in conquered territories was common. After Rome embraced Christianity however, the former easy equivalence between divinities became impossible, since the God of the Christians could not be the equivalent of all local deities, as it was the universal deity, and by definition, one alone. The policy of the Christian church was to employ the tactic of declaring local and foreign gods as devils and their followers as heathens. They and their characters were not to be embraced, but emphatically rejected.

As justification for this, the god of the Christians became something which had been shown to man by divine revelation, rather than a matter of philosophical argument about the nature of divinity. Whereas in the ancient model of divine things there was an easy acceptance that the gods were in some way realisations of the properties and attributes they represented, and that they could be interchanged and adapted, Yahweh, was the one true god, without peer, and for all eternity.

A similar process - the demonization of Caananite and foreign gods and the forbidding of their worship - occurred among the Hebrews in the earlier part of the first millennium B.C.E. Through the books of the Old Testament we can gain a little understanding of the arc of development in Hebrew thought, and something of the essentially

polytheistic nature of their intellectual system before the severe depredations of Hebrew culture by the Assyrians, particularly in the 8th century B.C.E.

The rise of monotheism in Egypt is particularly difficult to understand, but it is important to try and fathom its main aspects in order to gain a comparative view. It is not clear in fact that what we take to be the development of monotheistic belief in Egypt in the middle of the 2nd millennium B.C.E is any such thing. Before the rise of modern archaeology we knew little about Akhenaten, and there was a tendency among the first scholars to study the evidence, to read easy parallels with monotheism as represented in the Old Testament.

Excavation at modern Tell el Amarna (Akhet-aten, or 'Horizon of the Aten'/ 'Limit of the Aten'), Akhenaten's new city foundation, quickly revealed that here scholars were dealing with a king whose beliefs and cultural artefacts were significantly different from they had come to expect. He seems to have annoyed the priests of other Egyptian cults in his own time, and he is still capable of acting as a lightning rod for uninformed argument even now.*2

An important clue to the intellectual background of the change in styling lies in Akhenaten's former name: Amenhotep. At this time (the fourteenth century B.C.E.) the cult and the priesthood of the god Amun were powerful and prominent, and they had an important power base in Luxor. *3 Amun is the first element in the name of Akhenaten's original name, and that of his father. The relationship of Egyptian pharaohs to the various priesthoods is undeniably complex, however the tradition in Egypt was that the king was a representation of the divine on Earth. He was a god king, and could appear in the form of any member of the divine pantheon. No-one however would be comfortable with a Pharaoh whose principle identification would be that of a lesser god. So the most important divine name in the Pharaoh's name would be that of the divine cult which had the greatest power and prestige at the time. The cult would then be the cult of the King. *4

Amun is a strange god. He is unknowable and unseen. His shrine was kept in a darkened temple. He could be represented in one of his many forms, and through symbols. But his nature defies human understanding. He was regarded as an old god, though his cult did not have a history stretching back into the distant past. Which means that Amun was recognised as a primordial god, involved in the creation of the world, even if there was no ancient cult of Amun. This means that the God was understood to be *theologically* significant in the 14th century B.C.E. Hence the incorporation of the Gods's name in the names of successive pharaohs.

The significant point to remember is that, as Amenhotep, Akhenaten could appear in some divine form, but could not manifest as the god himself. That is, he was Amun, who appears as other things, but by his very nature, cannot appear directly in his principal nature. He transcends shape and form, and is the unknowable god. Clearly there is an abstruse theology behind the articulation of a divine nature which is invisible and unknowable. One might characterize the Assyrian god Ashur in a very similar way: he sits at the head of the pantheon, embraces the other gods, and manifests himself through presence and action expressed in terms of representation by other divine forms.

Akhenaten however had a very specific idea of what was divine. This idea departed radically from the complex and nuanced theologies of Luxor and Thebes. On the face of the matter, it used to be argued that Akhenaten represented the sun as divine. *5 This has been presented as a heresy pure and simple, from the point of view of the other priesthoods in Egypt. The evidence however does not support the notion that Akhenaten forbade the worship of other gods from the outset, or that the priesthoods of other gods regarded the worship of the Aten as a danger. After all, the sun was a divine figure in the pantheon of gods, represented by Re. But this was, at the time, a sun god whose essential nature was understood to be beyond its outward appearance. The sun was its symbol, and the good things which came to man from it were the product of its essential nature, rather than its appearance and physical properties of heat and light. We know this since at this particular period, the god Re was often conjoined with the unknowable formless god, as Amun-Re. In this way the representational and symbolic nature of the visible sun was emphasized.

It is useful to look closely at the name of Akhenaten's god. We know it as Aten, and that is how it is given by most scholars. His full title however was 'The Re-Horus who rejoices in the horizon, in his/her Name of the Light which is seen in the sun disk'. We find this full rendering of the Aten's name on the stelae placed around Akhetaten, which was Akhenaten's newly founded capital. These stelae were placed to mark the boundaries of the new foundation. Sometimes the full name was shortened to Re-Horus-Aten, or just 'Aten'. Since two of the names of

Akhenaten's god refer to the sun (Re being an older name for the sun god), it seems that some kind of intellectual synthesis of older ideas had taken place.

The Aten is first mentioned (to our knowledge) in the Story of Sinuhe, which dates at least as far back as the twelfth dynasty, where the dead king is described as uniting with with the sun-disk in the heavens. Akhenaten's iconography never shows the god in anthropomorphic form – instead the Aten is always shown as the sun disk with rays of light extending from it, with hands at the end of each ray. Akhenaten and his family receive these rays, and stand between the Aten and the ordinary Egyptians. The Sun god was considered to be neither male nor female, but both simultaneously, an idea which was reflected in the depiction of Akhenaten in sculpture and reliefs.

Eventually the worship of the other gods was proscribed, probably after a period of struggle between the royal court/cult of the Aten, and the priesthoods, for which we have no direct detail – particularly the priesthood of Amun. This does not mean that such a proscription was always part of the intention of Akhenaten; he may have felt that he was forced to do this owing to the strength of political opposition. However his adoption of the worship of the sun disk, of which he was the representative on earth, as the supreme deity, is an idea which does leave the other gods as fundamentally irrelevant to the life of Egypt. Akhenaten's Egypt however, was not monotheistic in any meaningful sense, as long as other gods were worshipped.

Was Akhenaten's reign a "revolutionary" period in Egyptian history? The evidence we have for Akhenaten is puzzling in a number of ways: he changed the artistic canon of Egypt, moved his capital, changed the public forms of worship and ritual; and changed the design of temples. The reasons for these changes are not easy to understand. Consequently Akhenaten has been the victim of both modern conjectures by Egyptologists, and also the speculations of the lunatic fringe: the evidence is enigmatic, suggestive, and lends itself to speculation. However, such is the psychological power of the ”perceived” figure of Akhenaten that even the actual evidence is sometimes discounted.

It is easy, for instance, to characterize Akhenaten as in some way abnormal, as an aberration within his culture, by arguing from the evidence of the extant Amarna letters and the boundary stelae that he walled himself up in his new city foundation of Akhet-Aten; also, from his apparent refusal to go to the assistance of his Levantine dominions when under attack from the north; and, developing this notion further into Akhenaten as the first notable pacifist, arguing that he was not depicted in the traditional warrior pose of "Smiter of Asiatics".

As for the last assertion, it is untrue to say that Akhenaten is not depicted in traditional fashion: he is shown as a warrior in a number of kiosks; also, he initiated one campaign in Nubia, and in the Levant he "responded to the collapse of the Mittani before the Hittites with a mixture of diplomacyand military action" [O'Connor, in Trigger, Kemp, O'Connor, Lloyd, *Ancient Egypt: A Social History*, ch. 3, p.220.] The remains of the Amarna archive of cuneiform tablets are insufficient for us to determine the precise nature of Akhenaten's response to Levantine difficulties: most of the letters are from Byblos, and their precise chronological order is uncertain. They *can* be arranged to illustrate a continuous decline, but they might as well be arranged to show a series of ups and downs.

As for his supposed voluntary imprisonment in his own capital Akhet-Aten, this also is a conclusion which is not warranted by the evidence. Akhenaten identifies one of his stelae saying that it is the "southern stela which is on the eastern mountain of Akhet-Aten, that is the stela of Akhet-Aten, which I shall let stand in its place" [M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. II, p. 50: the later Boundary Stelae of Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten)]. This can be literally understood to mean that he himself stayed permanently within its boundaries, but it is more likely that he meant that the stelae themselves would not be moved. Later in the same text [op. cit., p. 51] he emphasises the importance he attached to the existence of the stelae in the places in which they had been made. Of the oath on the stelae he says:

> It shall not be erased. It shall not be washed out. It shall not be hacked out. It shall not be covered with gypsum. It shall not be made to disappear. If it disappears, if it vanishes, if the stelae on which it is falls down, I shall renew it again, afresh in this place in which it is.

Why he regarded the precise limits of Akhet-Aten as a matter of great importance is not clear, though since the city was understood to participate in eternity it is easy to understand concern with the precision of its limits as an extension of Akhenaten's wish that the city abide.

The art of Amarna is, compared with the whole history of Egyptian art, distinctly naturalistic: is this an innovation by Akhenaten? A naturalistic style was already beginning to appear under Amenhotep III, although the precise chronology of this is difficult to determine because of the unsolved problem of co-regencies. It may be safe to say that Akhenaten developed (or rather encouraged through patronage) a style of art already coming into existence. On the other hand, the characteristics of images of Akhenaten may be connected with a pattern of religious ideas specifically associated with him: modern scholars find the religious ideas to be the strongest evidence of his revolutionary character.

It can be argued that what Akhenaten did was to change the emphasis on the character of Re, who had been becoming increasingly important in the eighteenth dynasty, so that the religious focus of Egyptian culture shifted even more from the invisible aspect of Re (Amun in the yoking Amun-Re), to the visible aspect of the sun, the disk (the Aten). This by itself does not represent a great innovation, for "the identification of king and disk had become more explicit in the reign of Tuthmosis IV... and was to continue until Ramesses III... the cult itself survived" [Trigger, et al, op. cit., p. 220.]

In the 'hymn to the sun' from El-Amarna, the Aten is described as the living sun. But it is also spoken of as Re. Both terms refer to the sun, but they do not mean precisely the same thing. One of his titles contains "Re": i.e., "Nefer kheprure - Sole one of Re". "Shu" also appears in one of his titles: i.e., "Harakhti that rejoiceth in the Horizon in his name Shu, which is the sun" [A. Erman, *The Ancient Egyptians,* pp.289-291; 292]. Therefore it is not legitimate to argue that Akhenaten rejected all forms of divinity save the Aten. What we *can* say from the evidence of Amarna art, the texts of the Amarna hymns, and the boundary stelae. is that he seems to have rejected all forms of divinity unconnected with the sun, or at least those not closely connected with it.

In focussing his attention on the sun's disk, what is Akhenaten doing? Is this a radical or reactionary change? One can argue from the hymns and the art that Akhenaten is *locating* his god in a very concrete way: worshipping the sun itself and its visible attributes and tangible properties (i.e., warmth and light; promotion of growth and vitality);with most other gods being ignored as irrelevant.

Two important facts require to be explained:

1. The suppression of Amun (associated with the sun through the yoking Amun-Re) by the quite literal obliteration of the name wherever it was found, and

2. the obliteration of references to "gods" in the plural ["Neteru"]. Amun (more accurately, Amun-Re) is described in other sources as "Greatest of heaven, eldest of earth, lord of what existeth who abideth in (?) all things. Unique in his nature... chiefest of all gods. Lord of Truth, father of the gods who made mankind, and created beasts... more immanent of nature than any god, over whose beauty the gods rejoice... thee who didst create the gods, raise up the sky and spread out the ground... the Lord of Eternity, who created everlastingness... thou whose chapel is hidden, lord of gods. [Erman, op. cit., "The Great Hymn to Amun", p. 283-4.]

The point here is that Akhenaten appears to have been suppressing the worship of a god whose very nature ought to have made it very difficult to conceive of such a worship in the first place, halfway through the 2nd millennium B.C.E. The description of his nature indicates that it is essentially a transcendent one. This is without question a philosophically based conception of a creator deity, the Lord of Eternity who created the other gods, who raised up the sky, and spread out the ground. In this hymn, Amun is the lord of an undifferentiated plenum, from which the physical world is generated.

Amun is one who remains forever unknown: "One falleth down dead on the spot for terror, if his mysterious, unknowable name is pronounced". That is, if we did know Amun, and could pronounce his name, it would breach every comfortable category of our understanding: "no god can address him by it, him with the soul (?) [i.e., the Ka which connects him with eternity] whose name is hidden, for that he is a mystery" [A. Erman, op. cit., p. 30]. In contrast the disk of the sun is a visible image of the divine, and is therefore a proper and publicly intelligible object of worship and adoration; and for the same reason the king is also a proper object of worship: since one is reckoned as the image of the other.

As noted earlier, the identification of the king and the sun disk predates the reign of Akhenaten, which implies that his actions and beliefs ought to be intelligible – to some extent at least - within a pre-existing pattern of ideas in Egypt. One might speculate that the singular nature of this image is the reason for the suppression of the

divine plurals, but I think that the matter is much more complicated. If Amun is intrinsically mysterious ("...none knoweth his mysterious nature..."), then to come to exist in the manifold of space and time, he must appear in a form which can be understood - as a manifestation or metaphor of his real unknowable nature.

Thus: "He who shaped his egg himself... the divine god who came into being of himself: all gods came into being, after he began to be". Hence all gods can be understood as aspects of the unknowable Amun: "of mysterious form... the wondrous god with many forms". But Amun "hid himself from the gods, and his nature is not known" [A. Erman, op. cit., p.299]. To determine the intention of Akhenaten's actions, we have to gain a clearer understanding of the meaning and usage of theological concepts and terms, in both his own period, and in the preceding dynasties. This clarity is some way off.

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1 There is little attempt to describe the transition to monotheism in terms of a serious competition of ideas. I remember the competition between the priesthoods of Yahweh and Baal from bible class in school – Yahweh and Baal were invoked sequentially to ignite kindling. Baal failed, and Yahweh succeeded.

2 All further instances of 'horizon' as a term should be understood to connote 'limit' and 'boundary', unless indicated otherwise. 'Akhet' may also mean 'inundation', which ties together the importance of the limit and inundation for the annual regeneration of the world.

3 The temple at Luxor appears to have been built around 1400 B.C.E., and was dedicated to the Theban Triad of the cult of the Royal Ka (Amun, Mut, and Khonsu). The Ka is one of the two Egyptian conceptions of the soul, and it represents Pharaonic participation in divinity. The temple complex is not dedicated to one god alone, but to three related aspects of divinity.

4 The cult of Amun is not as old as other Egyptian cults, and its importance did not arise simply from its longevity. So it is likely that there was a strong intellectual component in the struggle between the cult of Amun and the cult of the Aten in the 14th century B.C.E.

5 We are familiar with Plato using the sun as an image of the Good in the *Republic*, where its character and nature illustrates a point about leading men out of intellectual darkness. But there was no attempt to argue that the sun was the good or the divine in actuality.

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Cultural Continuity in the Ancient World, and Bernal's *Black Athena*

This text, in its original manuscript form, was the second chapter (original title: 'The Construction of the Intellectual world of Antiquity') of *The Shrine in the Sea*. It dates from June 2004. It did not make it through to the text which was published in 2015 with the new title: *The Sacred History of Being*. I've re-edited the text (May 2018).

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We have already come to terms with the idea that the world of ancient Greece, as it has been presented to us, is to a large extent the product of nearly two hundred years of industrious activity by scholars, and that the evidence for ancient Greece is not particularly well served by this construct.

In particular, philosophy in ancient Greece has been made into a wholly secular phenomenon, with no history in the religious life of the Greeks. The evidence does not bear this out: Harold Cherniss demolished the idea that Plato's Academy was a teaching and research establishment along the lines of the modern university back in the 1930s, and there are a number of clues which suggest that philosophy has a strong connection with the religious life of Greece.

Further, the 'history' of philosophy created by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* is an entity which conforms in format to a number of his other works, in that he begins from 'common opinion' and leads his audience in the direction of 'true opinion'. It may have been 'common opinion' in Athens that the presocratics and the sophists were pioneers of philosophy, but that is opinion, and not history. We have other materials to work with. This book puts Greek, Egyptian and Near Eastern materials together within a new hypothetical model of the intellectual model of antiquity.

It is a serious matter to claim that generations of scholars have not understood important aspects of the subject of their study, and that their methods of interpretation have been riven with systematic fault. This work has much to say about the modern intellectual world, since that is a major part of the problem in our understanding of the past, as well as the ancient

mental world itself. In part, this is because the work is an attempt to develop a pattern of discourse suitable for the understanding of antiquity in the modern world. To achieve this, it is necessary to put our relationship with our past into a proper context. Otherwise it is impossible to understand either of these worlds. The enlightenment view of an ancient 'urdummheit' underpinning cultural production is here shifted out of place, so that it becomes an intermittent phenomenon in human cultural history, rather than a certain continuum, and now capable of casting light on our own times.

The enlightenment agenda (and its products) has been subject to severe criticism since 1987, beginning with Martin Bernal. The community of ancient historians and classical scholars generally reacted with good grace to his pioneering and imperfectly researched analysis of two centuries of classical scholarship, *Black Athena*: *the Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985*. Meaning that they did not simply ignore his book. This was partly because some of the community was already uncomfortable with the history of their subject, and unhappy with the assumptions of cultural superiority (not just of the Greeks over the barbarians) which seemed to be implicit in the way classics operated as a subject.

The community of classicists and historians is one which is very dependent on peer approval and the 'soundness' of scholarship – of importance in any subject where – either through limited availability of evidence, or through the existence of discontinuities of evidence and interpretation – it is possible for an individual to wander off into territory of no value or credibility to the peer group.

As a community therefore, the classicists and historians were happier for a scholar to provide the criticism from the outside. If the criticism was sound, its conclusions might be absorbed without the necessity of a reorganisation of the hierarchy of the subject (though this would remain a risk). If incorrect, it could be dismissed as an amateur effort. And even better, the analysis focussed on the now obvious faults in the study of classics and ancient history – the eurocentric racism, and the strange methodology which could promote the judgement and interpretative genius of the scholar above evidence itself. These were things which the

classicists and historians would not defend at the time of the publication of Bernal's book (1987) as they might have done as late as 1945.

On balance therefore, it could have been so much worse. Bernal's attack was aimed at features of classical studies already overdue for serious overhaul, and several of his charges fell on receptive ground. Its agenda is essentially one which would have been familiar in a sociology department in the late 1960s. It was not written then because no-one within the subject was particularly interested in rocking their academic boat, and it took another twenty years for an interested and able outsider to come along and deliver what appeared to be the *coup de grace* to a number of the subject's sacred cows.

Another feature of the Bernal analysis which would have been pleasing to the classicists and historians was that it did not succeed in moving very much around, though it was concerned with doing such a thing. The lasting impression of his study is that the principal problem is the attitude of the classicists to their subject, rather the problem being a combination of attitude and what they had done – wilfully - to the accuracy of our understanding of the ancient world as a whole, through the evaluation and interpretation of evidence.

An exception to this was Bernal's attempt to establish contact between Egypt and Greece in the 2nd millennium B.C.E, based largely on a reified reading of Greek myths. In this he seems to have been following the lead of the poet Robert Graves, who read all sorts of myths in terms of charter documents and poetic accounts of actual political events. Additionally, Bernal suggested that a significant part of the Greek vocabulary could be shown to be related to the vocabulary of the ancient Egyptians.

Both of these attempts received serious and generally well-tempered criticism, even if the arguments have not been taken on board. What he was trying to do was to take ancient Greece out of its exalted orbit above all other civilizations, and root it in what he assumed to have been a cultural continuum around the Mediterranean sea from at least the mid-2nd century B.C.E up until the classical period of Greece in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C.E. Bernal pointed to the evidence within the texts of the 1st millennium which suggested cultural continuities with ancient Egypt –

generally dismissed by the classicists in favour of texts which could be interpreted as suggesting the opposite. These other texts did not mention colonization, and were treated as evidence that the colonizations did not happen.

Bernal's attempts to establish cultural continuity with the civilizations around the Mediterranean were hampered (the volume looking more closely at the linguistic affinities of Egypt and Greece did not appear until 2006) by the fact that myths are not simply encodings of historical and political change, and that the exchange of words between linguistic groups is, by itself, weak evidence for cultural continuity, though it can indicate significant cultural connection. He was correct to guess at the existence of the cultural continuity, I think, but ill-equipped to establish such a thing.

To do this requires *moving things around* – particularly the relationship of Greek philosophy to Greek patterns of religious belief and cult practice; and the relationship of Greek patterns of religious belief and cult practice to parallel ideas and activities in the Near East and Egypt. Currently, for classicists at least, the relationship between philosophy and Greek life and religious belief remains numinously and safely vague, despite two centuries of formal research activity in Europe. And the relationship between a philosophical theology and religious belief in the ancient Near East and in Egypt is presumed not to exist at all. This was a taller order than Bernal or anyone in his position could manage.

The Tangled Thread: Universals in History

This piece of text was the original (and short) opening chapter to the draft of *The Sacred History of Being* which was on my desk in 2004. I was toying with a number of possible titles for the book at the time, and the favoured title of the moment (June 2004) was *The Shrine in the Sea*. This was because there was a large focus on the Mesopotamian idea of the Abzu, home to Enki/Ea at the bottom of the sea. Ea was the broad-eared Mesopotamian god of wisdom, and all important things were understood to point back, in the end, towards the Abzu. Hence, the inauguration of divine statues required that the Abzu be closely referenced in liturgy and ritual, and the inaugurations took place where there was physical proximity to objects with symbolic connections to the Abzu, such as quays and river banks - all rivers in Mesopotamia being considered divine [DINGIR.ID], and the thresholds of temples. These details (and the rituals themselves) are discussed in detail in the closing chapters of *The Sacred History of Being*.

The liturgies and the description of the rituals have been published and translated, and their signifcance and meaning have been discussed by scholars. But they make difficult reading for the reason that they involve a different set of preconceptions from those understood by scholars of Mesopotamian civilization. It is hard to break through to an understanding of what was understood to be going on. Given the enormous passage of time since these rituals were devised, that is perhaps not surprising.

But there is another level of difficulty which we have created for ourselves, and in relatively recent times. The Mesopotamians employed ideas which they considered to be universally valid, such as all wisdom being present in the Abzu, and that the acquisition of knowledge depended on some kind of ritual engagement with Ea and the Abzu. And that the good order of the world depended on man's relation to the world of the divine.

Since the European Enlightenment, we have adopted another set of universal notions, which do not depend at all on the reality of the divine and the gods. In fact the set pushes the reality of the gods into the shadowlands of unreason. So there is little inclination among scholars who

specialise in Mesopotamia to spend time trying to makes sense of things which are intrinsically unreasonable in nature.

In an age where both ideas of realpolitik and the centrality of ideology and different varieties of determinism (philosophical and economic in particular) are assumed by professional historians to be the constants in history which eluded our predecessors, it is easy to introduce suppositions into historical analysis without any sense of violating the proper context of the evidence. I will deal with some of the difficulties in the course of this book. For now it is enough to mention the difficulties which stand between us and the use of evidence which does more than fit the pieces crudely into a pattern of meaning conformant with expectation, or at least fits within the parameters of what we are prepared to countenance as a credible model of the past.

More significant than individual difficulties however, is the complex interaction of one with the other, and the successive layers of these interacting obstacles to our understanding. Any age has a body of beliefs, sometimes contradictory and multiple, differing across social groups, societies and nations, which are essentially assumed. They are not often examined closely (if at all) because they have the special status of commonly held truths. Not common in the sense that they are base or full of superstition, but common in that they are either tacitly agreed, or it is agreed that it is permissible or even desirable to hold these beliefs. These beliefs vary from age to age. These patterns of belief change – sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly.

We have, since the enlightenment in Europe, created a body of ideas which is designed to support our world and its perspectives with a theoretical underpinning. That underpinning is, in broad terms, rationalism. We are by and large so sure of the rightness of our ways of thinking, particularly in the modern Western world, that we have now elevated rationalism to a place above all other perceptions of the world, in the whole of history.

This can be understood as the culmination of the rationalist and humanist agenda of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Rationalists and humanists understood themselves to be struggling under the deadweight of accumulated belief and superstition, as well as the institutions and

powers which drew their authority from the religious structures dominating the intellectual landscape. Drawing on the intellectual models of nature which developed during the seventeenth century, the rationalist perception of the world constantly sought to describe reality in terms of the laws of physics and mechanics. Nature became something which could be the subject of operations, rather than an outward expression of the mystery and character of the divine. The latter construct was ignored. Descartes picture of the world shut this aspect of reality out as unnecessary for the analysis of the world, without significant argument in favour of this beyond the assertion that the world of the divine need not be invoked in order to explain the physical world.

The severing of this link had enormously beneficial results in terms of the development of the sciences in general – matters were simplified enormously if all that was being considered was what could be measured, counted and weighed; and there was no imponderable interference from the intrusion of the divine.

However it was *not* the case that the world of the divine had been shown to be of no account in the development of an understanding of nature – the exclusion of this aspect of reality was simply decreed, since it had been decided that it was unnecessary for our understanding of the natural world.

As the sciences progressed, the quality and power of the descriptive models of nature created supplied, for all practical purposes, the proof that a knowledge of the world of the divine was unnecessary for an understanding of nature. Thereafter, the divine became, in the world of the sciences, something to be scorned, as a relic of the days when the human race lived in a state of irrational superstition. The scientific and rational model of understanding nature then clarified its identity partly in opposition to the patterns of thought which it sought to escape. The next logical step was to try to supplant the models of the world in which the divine was deemed to function as creator or agent. This was in essence the eighteenth century Enlightenment agenda.

After the eighteenth century, the idea of the divine and its associated technicalities became less and less interesting to study. In the early twenty-

first century, it is a matter for the philosophical specialist working principally with materials created during the Christian era, or for the credulous. And within academia, the consideration of the divine outside this is *verboten* in close detail - though it may be studied in anthropological terms, in terms of social dynamics, or in terms of human pathology - for the simple reason that it is axiomatic that *a philosophically grounded theology of the world dates only from the application and adaptation of Greek philosophical concepts in the creation of Christian theology in the first centuries of the modern era*.

Christian theology has always appeared weak to the rationalist world by dint of its appropriation of Greek philosophical ideas for its intellectual support, since the Enlightenment enterprise itself traces its own foundations to the Academy and the Lyceum. It is hard therefore to defend Christian theology against an argument coming from specialists in its own intellectual background.

However, a sophisticated, technical theology arriving from beyond the cultural arc stretching from Ancient Greece to the parlours and salons of the eighteenth century would be unwelcome to both rationalists and Christian theologians, since it might reframe the origins of both the rationalist world view and of Christianity. The hypothesis explored in this book is that just such a philosophical theology existed in the ancient world, and that it is, by close analysis of the evidence, possible for us to understand many of its details, as well as the intellectual background it provided to both the development of philosophy in Greece, and the origins of Christianity.

The Age of the Lord Buddha

Scholars acquiesce in the convention established by modern Greek scholarship, which is that an articulate and technical understanding of the idea of Being was first broached by the Greeks in the middle of the 1st Millennium B.C.E. It follows therefore that all references to the divine in the ancient near east before that date are not articulate and technical references, but notional and inchoate. The consequence must be that we can learn nothing useful about ancient intellectual processes and concerns from these notions, since they are beliefs entirely unsupported by rational argument.

This would come as a surprise to many ancient cultures, if they were still around. It should come as a big surprise to us to, since, if various cultural patterns in the past share a degree of congruence with one another, at a deep level, as they do, it is hard to explain this phenomenon without concluding that the cultural patterns are the outcome of some form of rational discussion.

I'm thinking here of the way kings referred to each other as 'brothers' in the near eastern bronze age, since they were united by their status. As kings they were 'complete' and not in want of things. They also shared some of the characteristics attributed to the gods, and sometimes styled themselves as actual gods, or otherwise deemed themselves to be the very image of the divine. Underneath the huge variety of deities, the meaning of divinity itself seems to have been a shared and agreed concept. This is in addition to the normal characterisation of the bronze age in the near east as a cultural continuum, in terms of the power of the king, patterns of trade and exchange, the making of treaties, the paying of tribute, and so on.

These congruences are explained away in terms of other aspects of the function and nature of the human mind which we all hold in common, such as feeling, awe, terror, separation, commonality, purity, taboo, notions of sacred and profane space, and so on (I'm thinking here particularly of French anthropology).

The way to establish whether or not rational argument might have been involved in the creation of these ancient models is to create the hypothesis that it was so involved, and to explore the ramifications of the idea. If the hypothesis explains more than other explanations do, and creates fewer problems within the parameters of the evidence, then the hypothesis has a probability of being correct. If the exploration of the hypothesis allows us to propose further questions which we can ask of the evidence in order to test the hypothesis, and the hypothesis is supported by the answers to these new questions, then the probability that it represents a viable interpretative model is increased.

The scholarly compact in the west which, in support of the idea of progress and cultural evolution, is in agreement with the view of classical scholarship that the Greeks invented articulate discussion of the idea of Being as a proper subject for philosophy, also supports the idea that they were also the first to deal rationally with abstract ideas, such as universals and absolutes – ideas beyond physical instances. This includes the development of mathematics.

There was shock therefore when evidence came along which appeared to suggest that the Babylonians had mastered algebra to the point where they were working with quadratic equations. This interpretation is now deprecated. *1

The compact has poisoned a lot of wells, since the imposition of ideas of progress and cultural evolution within a period of relatively recent time, means that we know that certain things were impossible before the Greeks came along. Where references suggestive of abstract thought or an interest in universals cannot be written off as inchoate, the dating of the evidence is challenged.

The date of the Buddha's floruit for western scholars is much closer to our own time than it is for scholars in the east. We place him around the 5th century B.C.E, since there is clearly an interest in universals in the texts.

The *Puranas* provide a chronology of the Magadha rulers from the supposed time of the Mahabharata war, and Buddha is supposed to have become enlightened during the reign of Bimbisara, the 5th Shishunaga ruler, who, according to this chronology, ruled between 1852-1814 B.C.E. His birth date may have been 1887 B.C.E. Chinese scholarship has long maintained that Buddhism came to China from India around 1200-1100B.C.E.

Indian philosophy in general, which is awash with abstract ideas and universals, and is clearly very old, has similarly been down-dated to a production date around the middle of the 1st millennium B.C.E. The principal

exception to this general down-dating is the older parts of the *Rig Veda*, which show clear signs of having been composed in the middle of the second millennium B.C.E.

Chinese philosophy is similarly constricted to the middle of the 1st millennium, which preserves the integrity of the Greek achievement.

Egypt, which, at one time, the Greeks themselves thought of as the home of philosophical thought, has been downgraded by us, so that we regard the Egyptians as a people dealing in concrete rather than abstract concepts. What this means is that the simplest possible meaning that can be ascribed to a sign or a symbol, is the right one. A picture of a hand most likely signifies a hand; a bull's head represents a bull's head; an image of an axe represents an axe; an image of a bowl is a bowl.

However the image of an axe is associated in Egyptian texts with the power of decision, and the image of a bowl is associated with lordship, through the ideas of completeness and plenitude, so these images often appear in connection with gods and kings. But these images are not understood by us to represent abstract concepts. Just concrete images which connote power and status, through an ancient association of ideas which is invisible to us. Egyptian interest in magic is deemed 'pragmatic' and it is assumed that it was not connected in any way with a philosophical understanding of the world.

Just to be clear, there is much more riding on the argument - that the abstract idea of Being is key to the early development of sophisticated human thought - than just whether it is true or not, and whether a useful interpretative model can be generated from looking at the evidence from this point of view. Much of our history may be in need of some adjustment.

Age of Milinda, Buddha, Amtiyoka & Yugapurana, by Sri Kota Venkatachalam, first published in 1956, discusses the earlier chronology for the Buddha, and the problems created by western scholarship on the subject.

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1 Discussed and despatched by Otto Neugebauer, who once declared that he did not believe that synthetic thought (as opposed to analytic thought) was possible. This might be taken to mean that he would be a harsh critic of anything that looked like synthetic (or inductive) thought in antiquity.

Stone Circles, Phenomenology, and the Neolithic Mind

How could we ever understand the function of these objects, in the absence of any contemporary account? Archaeology and scholarship have been applied to the problem of these mysterious objects, but we are apparently still none the wiser. When it was first noticed that these objects were in some way astronomically aligned, that was a step forward, but in fact the observation did not advance us much in understanding the function of the monuments. They mark rising and setting points, and other extreme positions, and so there is the possibility of a calendrical function.

It is hard however to imagine that keeping tabs on the seasons was a principal function of these objects. You don't need to observe the heavens in any detail in order to know it is time to sow, and time to harvest. If you want to know the length of the year, this can be established with simple observation. After that you could tell that you were in midwinter or at midsummer, at least until the precession of the equinoxes and the imperfection of the quarter day at the end of the year gradually moved things out of kilter. And so leap years would be invented to keep the seasons roughly where they should be, and intercalary days and months would be introduced where necessary over longer periods of time. All this has been done elsewhere, and through time, in the context of relatively basic observations.

The work of Alexander Thom, who surveyed the megalithic monuments in Britain over a period of more than 40 years from the 1930s onwards, confirmed to those of us with eyes to see, that indeed the circles have a serious astronomical function. He also confirmed that the circles, with their observational platforms and their distant farsights, often on hills and mountains many miles away, have in many cases, a fearful precision about them, whether these farsights mark the rising and declination of the principal stars, the rising and setting of the sun at different points in the year, the solstices and the equinoxes, and the peculiar movements of the moon at various points during the 19 year metonic cycle.

The main objection of the archaeological community to the acceptance of this view of the circles as sophisticated tools for the observation of the

heavens and its movements is two-fold. The first is that there is nothing (beyond what these objects seem to show) which suggests to us that the megalith builders and their contemporary culture was concerned at all with precision. The second is that, even if the circles can be shown to mark certain astronomically precise points, we have no clue at all about why the megalith builders would want to do this. We have no understanding of the function and purpose of such observations, and so we can say virtually nothing about either the purpose of the monuments, or about the culture which gave rise to them. In other words we are no further forward in our understanding.

This two-fold objection is sound, at least from the archaeologists point of view. We have no contemporary description of anything at all from the time and culture of the megalith builders. We have no understanding of their intentions, and no understanding of the function of the circles, and it is unlikely that archaeological interpretation by itself will reveal these things to us. It seems to be gone altogether, and all we are left with is insupportable speculation. Perhaps it would be best to draw a veil over this apparently anomalous aspect of the past, since we can have no understanding of it.

Yet we do know that other cultures had a concern with precision, and with precise measure. Egypt is well known to have had such a concern, at least during some parts of its history, as the orientation of its temples and its artistic canons show. Precision is a feature of Mesopotamian civilization, as exemplified in Babylonian mathematics; and Hebrew literature also contains precise descriptions of objects. Ancient Greece likewise understood precision (*akribeia*), exemplified in the design of the Parthenon.

What does this concern with precision mean? We can start from what we know, and throw off what we only *think* we know about the Neolithic mind. One of these presumptions is that intelligence and intellectual sophistication is relatively new, and that consequently these things are not to be found in the Neolithic period. If we presume instead that it *is* present, and in fact it is not, we will know our mistake soon enough. If

we presume that intellectual sophistication is not present, and in fact it *is*, we will be left with the intractable puzzle we are attempting to solve.

I have argued elsewhere that, for both Greece and Assyria, the heavens, and what the heavens represented, were of particular importance for cult practice. Plato is clear that the heavens represent an image of divine Being, also spoken of as the 'Living Animal', created out of the materials of other gods, by the demiourgos (the 'Living Animal' is created by the demiourgos rather than by God directly, so that there should be not too much of the divine present in the world). He is also quite explicit that the body of the 'Living Animal' was created with precision.

In which case astronomy is important for the understanding of divine Being. An infamously unintelligible passage in Plato's *Timaeus* talks about the perception of images being possible only because the soul already contains exemplars of these. If the heavens represent an image of divine Being, then all other images are poor imitations, and we should direct our attention principally to the heavens. The soul represents the heavens most closely, and in antiquity was notionally the part of us which is most connected to the divine. It is the soul which recognizes divine knowledge when it is presented to it.

In ancient Assyria, part of the ritual for creating an image of a god (thereby conferring divinity on the object) involves the image being exposed to the sight of the heavens. As a god, it needs to have perception of Being, of which it is an aspect. We have this ritual from the reign of Esarhaddon (7^{th} century B.C.E.), who was the predecessor of Ashurbanipal, one of the last Assyrian kings, and the owner of the famous palace library, much of which is now located in the British Museum.

In the *Republic*, Plato argues that the philosopher should ascend to the idea of the Good, which is another way of referencing the idea of transcendent Being, by a series of connected images, without specifying what those images might be. These images, as imperfect representations of Being, are subject to change. Matters are complicated by the fact that the things which are imaged are also subject to change. Thus both subjective impression and objective reality are subject to change and uncertainty.

In his dialogues, Plato shows that most arguments about the nature of the ultimate reality fail – particularly in his dialogue most concerned with Being, the *Sophist*. Here the participants in the dialogue agree to accept that a communion between man and the divine must be granted to exist, even if it cannot be argued certainly to be the case. The necessity of this communion is vital to religion, otherwise it is not possible for man to connect with the divine, and therefore he would be powerless in the world in which he finds himself.

A key characteristic of ancient religion was that it entertained conjecture regarding knowledge of the gods. Plato refers to this in his discussion of the divided line in The *Republic*. We cannot know Being itself directly. We cannot know the lesser gods directly either, but we can understand some of the characteristics of these gods, though full knowledge is necessarily beyond our understanding. We can approach some limited understanding of Being via the images and descriptions of the lesser gods however, which is one reason why they were deemed to have some kind of reality.

This limited set of characteristics and properties emerges from thorough and precise discussion of the nature of ontology (Being), as the focus of human conjecture. This is quite clear in both Plato and also in what we know of the teachings of Pythagoras. The paradox of knowledge is the consequence of the idea that all knowledge is present in the divine, and that we only have knowledge because we have a soul. In other words, we can have knowledge as the result of the divine having a presence in us already.

Since the divine is transcendent, there must be only a limited set of properties of the divine which can have exemplars in the world of appearance (the mundane earthly world). These properties cannot be things which have no meaning or permanent reality in the divine world. Thus one would not expect arbitrary sizes and colours, for example, or things which are changeable and impermanent. Since the reality of Being is at the extreme of our understanding, and is in itself necessarily an extreme, those who would look for thing on earth which are exemplars of the divine would look for things which were in some way extreme, and

which exist in conjunction with other things which participate in the divine extremity.

In both Greece and Assyria, during the inauguration of divine statues, the statues, which are treated as markers of divinity on earth, representing and, in some instances, creating divinity through the will of the inaugurators, were pointed at the sky at a key point in the ritual. This is so that the statues could see (and know) Being, as represented by the heavenly bodies. In the ritual from Nineveh, the gaze of the statue is pointed at different parts of the sky and different parts of the horizon, in a precise sequence.

So we have an understanding of what was believed to be taking place in such a ritual, once we have a clear understanding of the model of reality in which the ritual served its function. There is evidence from Mesopotamia that this conceptual model was in existence at least as far back as the eighteenth century B.C.E.

It is possible that this model of reality, essentially established through logical argument, was very widely spread, and was not confined to the near East, and was in fact something like a standard view for those who had the time and the liberty to think about such matters.

The evidence from the megaliths makes the importance of the sky very clear. The hypothetical argument to be tested here, is that also in Britain and around the megalithic world, the sky was seen as a representation of divinity, of Being. As an image of the divine, it was an image of totality itself.

The megalithic observatory, or temple, according to this hypothesis, was a device to embody aspects of divinity, of Being, actually in its structure, in the same way in which the gods in Mesopotamia might be invited to ‘occupy’ their representations on earth.

What about this representation of divinity might qualify as capable of representation on earth? Not the motion of the planets in themselves, since they appeared to be subject to a degree of arbitrariness (with the exception of Venus). The most obvious candidates for the establishment of extreme rising and setting points were the Sun and the Moon – the most

prominent aspect of the heavenly representation. The equinoxes would also be of interest, since these represent the points at which the Sun and Moon pass along the path of the ecliptic and cross the celestial equator.

The doctrine of totality is common to both Pythagoras and Plato, and also surfaces, much earlier, in Assyria, as far back as Shamshi Adad I, who reigned in the eighteenth century B.C.E. One of his titles was: 'King of Totality' (Shar Kishati). This doctrine makes it clear that many aspects of the world have something of a double nature: Plato argued for example that 'greatness' implied participation in 'the great'. Likewise the divine reality is total, and participation in the divine reality implies the presence of a form of totality in whoever was regarding the heavenly representation of the divine. The sacred is, in some respects, always present in the secular. Both Pythagoras and Plato held that things only come to be by wholes through wholes.

We can now make a preliminary list of things which, if we assume an intellectual sophistication, born of a culture familiar with logical argument, would perhaps have been of particular interest to observers who were part of megalithic culture:

> Extremity, Totality, Perfection, Completion, Invariance, Integral (whole) numbers, The incorruptible, Greatness, Rising, Setting, Beginning, Ending, Duration, Periodicity, & Points of transformation.

This list illustrates the sort of abstracted interest I propose the megalithic builders had in aspects of the world, which interest follows from the conceptual model of reality which I have described. All of these have exemplars on both the earth, and in the sky. These characteristics would, within this conceptual model, have been understood to provide points of contact, and a bridge to the divine.

A megalithic circle might therefore be conceived as a representation, in an abstracted form, of the perfection of the heavens, and of Being itself. It would demonstrate its perfection to those who had the understanding to see this for themselves, and would mark the extreme points of the movement of the heavenly bodies. It would be constructed only using

integral values, derived where possible, proportionately, from the movement of the heavens in relation to the earth. It would be built out of the most incorruptible materials (most often stone), and where possible, the stone would remain unworked, as something which, in its natural state, already possessed commonality with divine Being. The stones would be large, since their largeness by itself represents unworldliness, and another commonality with Being. The arrangement of the stones would be the way in which this commonality would be reduplicated and intensified. Heavenly cycles would be embodied in the structure where possible, together with indications (in some cases) of their duration.

As we know from the studies made by Alexander Thom, the stone circles were built on the basis of various sizes of Pythagorean right-angled triangles, and laid out with ropes of precise length. The construction process was designed and executed in such a way that the circumference of the circles, whether truly circular, egg-shaped, or flattened, would always be an integral number of the units used. This interest in integral numbers seems to have been universal among the builders of the circles. The connectivity the integral numbers opened to Being is the reason why this was important.

We are told by Julius Caesar (in his *Gallic Wars*), that the Druids, at the time of his arrival in Northern Europe, taught astronomy and mathematics, and held to a doctrine akin to Pythagoreanism. In fact this section of the text seems to belong to the Roman equivalent of the CIA factbook, so it is probably a fairly accurate assessment by those in Rome whose job it was to collect useful information about cultures around the known world, into which Rome was expanding.

There are strong parallels between the ideas of Plato and Pythagoras as has already been noted, and Plato is reputed to have made significant efforts to obtain texts from the Pythagoreans. Both regarded the world as the product of mind: both the transcendental realm of Being, and the world of appearance. So there is, at a conjectural level, a series of connections between the divine world and the world of appearance, which can be discovered. All other stories about the world are mere likelihood. Modern scholarship on Greek philosophy stops short of this understanding

of Greek thought. Plato's highest level of reality is never explored, and even the approach to it is left shrouded in mystery.

The presence of an articulate idea of Being explains aspects of Mesopotamian theology and ideas about creation, as well as illuminating aspects of Homer's *Iliad*, which of course precedes both Plato and Pythagoras by several centuries. There are strong parallels between Greek and Mesopotamian ideas of Being, which I have explored elsewhere. Both cultures practice theurgy (though the term does not make an appearance until much later), and the theoretical basis for this is similar, in that the twofold aspect of creation makes it possible for workmen (under the direction of the king, who in himself embodies several aspects of divinity in his official position) to have their sacred aspect initialized, so that they can set up gods in heaven. They can do this because they have had divinity put upon them by the king who is directing operations, in conjunction with instructions from his diviners. This is possible because they already possess divinity and connection to the divine, though 'they are blind and deaf' to this understanding throughout their lives, as Esarhaddon tells us.

Thus, they, like everyone else, and the world, is a representation of Being, and the divine reality.

What I suggest Plato is doing, during a period of intense cultural crisis in Greece, is transmitting in writing, in a scrambled and elliptical fashion, key aspects of a Bronze Age philosophy, which has its roots in the Neolithic in both Europe and the near East. The transcendental doctrine which is enshrined in his work is actually in plain sight to anyone who can follow his reasoning that all the merely likely stories are just that: no more than likely. The single argument which is not a mere likelihood, is counterintuitive, paradoxical, and beyond common sense. And it remains a matter of conjecture. This argument about the nature of the world used to be the apex of learning and knowledge. Reality is transcendental, and neither subjective or objective. Nothing lay beyond this fundamental understanding of the world.

If this argument is correct, then we *can* know what Neolithic man was up to, and in some detail. In short, for the intellectually sophisticated in the Neolithic period, the heavens represented, as for Plato much later, a

moving image of eternity. To measure the parameters of this moving image of the divine was to know God, and to have knowledge of divine things.

What was once a complete and deafening silence is now filled with many voices. We can never know the words they used, but we can know what they talked about, since anyone who talks about Being, and the connections between Being and the world of appearance will talk about the same things, and come to the same sort of conclusions. Some of these arguments have a practical upshot in the creation of sacred sites. They would look for extreme points in the heavens, since the heavens comprise a representation of the divine. The extreme points of the motions of the heavenly bodies represent a connection between the extreme of Being, and the secular world.

The principal concern was the nature and reality of Being, and the nature of reality itself. All philosophical instruction would have been designed to lead the neophyte, by dint of the repeated failure of argument to establish any solid and reliable conclusion within the confines of common sense, to the conclusion that the reality that we perceive is essentially transcendental in nature. And that the nature of the divine is a conjecture which must be held as just that, a conjecture. Anything less and it becomes an opinion, which isn't real knowledge.

Many practices in the ancient world emanate from this perspective on reality. Sacrifice is one. The origin of the idea is that something which has been completed is connected with the divine, which is also complete. Even if the termination of life is artificial and precipitate. The idea is also reflected in the conversation between Solon and Croesus reported by Herodotus, where Solon, in response to Croesus, says 'call no man happy until his end'. Divination by entrails also is based on the same idea, that by inspection of the entrails of an animal whose life has been 'completed' (even now we may say 'totalled,' to mean something utterly ended), something of the divine can be understood.